SŪRAH 40

Ghāfir

(The Forgiver)

Prologue

This *sūrah* deals with the major issues of truth and falsehood, faith and unfaith, the message and those who reject it, as well as unjustifiable tyranny and how God smites tyrants who seek to impose their will on others. It also refers to the position of believers who follow Divine guidance and obey God's commandments. It mentions how the angels pray that they may be forgiven their sins, and how God answers their prayers. It also speaks about the reward awaiting them in the life to come.

Such being its subject matter, the whole atmosphere of the *sūrah* is one of a battle, the battle between truth and falsehood, faith and tyranny. This is interspersed with an air of grace and mercy whenever the believers are mentioned. The general atmosphere is generated through a description of how earlier communities were destroyed as a result of their opposition to Divine faith, as well as several images of the Day of Judgement. All in all, these awesome images suit the sombre air of the *sūrah*.

Fittingly, the opening of the *sūrah* uses short phrases that carry a distinctive beat: '*who forgives sins; accepts repentance; is severe in retribution; limitless in bounty; there is no deity other than Him; to Him is the ultimate return.*' (Verse 3) These phrases sound like hammers

striking in unison, with harmony between meaning and rhythm. Note also that words like 'might' and 'power' are frequently used in the *sūrah*.

As a whole, the *sūrah* has a powerful effect on us, portraying as it does scenes of the Day of Judgement and images of the fate of earlier communities. At times, it softens its rhythm so as to gently touch our hearts, showing us images of the angels who carry God's throne, as well as those around it, praying to God to bestow His grace on His devoted servants. The same may be said regarding the verses that refer to universal scenes or to the finer elements of the human soul, as both provide evidence in support of the truth of faith. Here, then, are some examples of the verses that generate these feelings:

1. In reference to earlier communities and their fate: "*Before their time the people of Noah rejected the truth, as did other groups and communities after them. Each of these communities schemed against the messenger sent to them, aiming to lay their hands on him. With false argument they strove to refute the truth, but then I took them to task. How awesome was My punishment!*" (Verse 5) "*Have they, then, never travelled through the land and beheld what happened in the end to those who lived before them? Greater were they in power than they are, and in the impact which they left on earth. God, however, took them to task for their sins, and they had none to defend them against God. That was because their messengers came to them with all the evidence of the truth, yet they rejected it. So God took them to task. He is powerful, stern in retribution.*" (Verses 21–22)
2. In reference to the Day of Resurrection: "*Warn them of the Day that is ever drawing near, when people's hearts will chokingly come up to the throats. The wrongdoers will have neither intimate friend nor intercessor to be heeded.*" (Verse 18) "*Do you not see how those who dispute God's revelations are turned away from the truth? Those who reject the Book and the messages We sent through Our messengers. They will certainly come to know when, with chains and shackles round their necks, they will be dragged into scalding water, and then burnt in the fire of hell.*" (Verses 69–72)

3. A softer touch is provided in the scene of those who carry God's throne, devoted as they are in humble prayer: "*Those who bear the Throne and those around it extol their Lord's limitless glory and praise, and have faith in Him, and pray for the forgiveness of all believers: Our Lord! You embrace all things with [Your] grace and knowledge. Forgive, then, those who turn to You in repentance and follow Your path, and shield them from the suffering in the blazing fire. And, our Lord, admit them to the gardens of perpetual bliss You have promised them, together with the righteous from among their ancestors, spouses and offspring. You alone are the Almighty, the Wise. Shield them from all evil. Anyone whom on that day You shall shield from evil, You shall have graced with mercy. That will be the supreme triumph.*'" (Verses 7–9)
4. Inspirational touches are achieved in the portrayals of miraculous phenomena in the universe and within the human soul: "*It is He who creates you out of dust, then out of a gamete, then out of a clinging cell mass; and then He brings you forth as infants. He then lets you reach maturity, and then grow old – although some of you die earlier. [All this He ordains] so that you may reach your appointed term, and you may use your reason. It is He who ordains life and death. When He wills something to be, He only says to it, 'Be', and it is.*" (Verses 67–68) "*It is God who has made for you the night in which to rest, and the day to make you see. God is limitless in His bounty to man, but most people do not give thanks. Such is God, your Lord, the Creator of all that exists: there is no deity other than Him. How deluded can you be?*" (Verses 61–62) "*It is God who has made the earth a resting place for you and the sky a canopy. He has moulded you into a comely shape and provided you with wholesome things. Such is God, your Lord. So glory be to God, the Lord of all the worlds.*" (Verse 64)

In all these images there is evident harmony and consistency, the whole ambience perfectly fitting the *sūrah*'s subject matter.

The *sūrah* may be divided into four parts. The first begins with two separate letters: "Ḥā. Mīm. *The revelation of this book is from God, the Almighty, the All-Knowing.*" (Verses 1–2) This is followed by the short

phrases with their distinctive beat, to which we referred earlier. The *sūrah* then states that the whole universe submits to God and obeys Him. Only the unbelievers dispute God's revelations, thus they separate themselves from the rest of the universe. Therefore, the Prophet should pay no attention to them, no matter how affluent and well pleased they appear to be. They will inevitably face the same fate suffered by earlier communities of unbelievers. God smote them with a stern punishment. Nevertheless, more suffering awaits them in the life to come. By contrast, the angels carrying God's throne, as well as those surrounding it, declare their belief in their Lord, address their worship to Him alone, and pray for the forgiveness of the believers among the dwellers of the earth, as well as for their success and prosperity.

At the same time, the *sūrah* gives an image of the unbelievers when the entire universe, which believes in God, calls out to them on the Day of Resurrection, saying: *"Indeed, greater than your present loathing of yourselves is God's loathing of you when you were called to the faith and you rejected it."* (Verse 10) In their position of humiliation, which contrasts with their arrogance in this present life, they admit their faults and acknowledge their Lord, but such realization is now of no use to them. They are only reminded of what they used to do when they associated partners with God and arrogantly turned from His guidance.

This image of the hereafter is followed by one presenting people's situation in this present life: "*He it is who shows you His signs and sends down sustenance from the sky for you.*" (Verse 13) They are so reminded in order that they may turn to their Lord and declare their belief in Him as the only God: "*Pray to God, then, sincere in your faith in Him alone, however hateful this may be to the unbelievers.*" (Verse 14) The *sūrah* then adds a strong warning of that fearful day, and follows this with an image of how they stand on that day: "*the Day when they shall come forth, with nothing about them concealed from God.*" (Verse 16) Those who are arrogant, tyrannical or disputant will all disappear into insignificance: "*With whom does sovereignty rest today? With God, the One who holds absolute sway over all that exists.*" (Verse 16) The *sūrah* goes on to give further images of that day when judgement over all belongs to God alone. All those worshipped instead or alongside Him are nowhere to be seen.

The second part begins with a reference to the fate suffered by some past communities. This serves as a prelude to the narration about certain events from Moses' life history and specifically his encounter with Pharaoh, Hāmān and Korah or Qārūn. These events, representing tyrants' attitude to the message of truth, are only told in this *sūrah*. There is no reference to them anywhere else in the Qur'ān. They tell us of a believer from Pharaoh's own household, who concealed the fact that he believed in Moses' message. He tries first to protect Moses against Pharaoh's attempt to kill him. He states the word of truth, putting it cautiously at first, then ultimately declaring it openly and clearly. In his argument with Pharaoh, this believer presents strong and clear evidence for the truth, warns Pharaoh and his people of the Day of Judgement, describes some images of the day in an inspirational way and reminds them of their attitude and that of generations before them to Joseph and his message. The story is developed in such a way as to link it, eventually, to the life to come, and we see them all there, disputing among themselves as they suffer in hell. The dialogue occurs between the weak elements of society and their arrogant leaders, on the one side, and another takes place between them all and the angels in charge of hell, trying to find a way out when there is none. In the light of this last scene, the *sūrah* directs the Prophet Muḥammad to remain patient in adversity, to have full trust that God's promise will come true, and to glorify and praise Him.

The third part starts with a statement that those who dispute God's revelations without providing any sound argument in support of what they say are only motivated by a quest for greatness. Yet they are too insignificant to attain this. The *sūrah* then directs people's hearts to reflect on the great universe God has created, which is far greater than all mankind. This reminder may perhaps make those who are arrogant better appreciate the greatness of God's creation, rather than remaining blind to it: "*The creation of the heavens and the earth is indeed greater than the creation of man; yet most people do not understand.*" (Verse 57) It reminds them of the approach of the Last Hour and directs them to pray to God, for He responds to those who pray to Him.

Those who choose to remain arrogant will inevitably enter hell in complete humiliation. Here the *sūrah* portrays some of the universal signs that they ignore. We see the night portrayed as a time for rest and

the day is given eyes, while the earth is shown as a resting place and the sky a canopy. In relation to themselves, the *sūrah* also reminds them to reflect on the pleasing shape and form God has given them. It directs them to submit to God with sincerity. It instructs the Prophet to distance himself from what they worship, declare God's order to him to reject their deities and to submit to the Lord of all the worlds. It seeks to make their hearts more responsive by mentioning that God, the Creator of the universe, is the One who originated them from dust first, then from a gamete. It is He who gives life and deals death. Again the *sūrah* makes the Prophet wonder at those who argue about God, warning them against punishment in the hereafter, and portrays a very powerful image of such punishment: "*They will certainly come to know when, with chains and shackles round their necks, they will be dragged into scalding water, and then burnt in the fire of hell.*" (Verses 70–72) Indeed, those whom they worshipped will disown their worship, while they themselves deny having ever worshipped anyone. Ultimately, they end up in hell, as they are told: "*Enter now the gates of hell, where you shall abide. Evil indeed is the abode of the arrogant.*" (Verse 76) Again, in the light of this scene the Prophet is instructed to remain patient in adversity, and to trust in the fulfilment of God's promise, whether he remains alive to see some of what this promise involves or he is made to die before its fulfilment. The promise will come true at the time appointed for it.

The *sūrah*'s fourth and final part is closely linked with its third. As the Prophet is directed to wait patiently, he is told that God sent many messengers before him: "*No messenger could bring a sign except by God's leave.*" (Verse 78) Still, there are many signs in the universe, and there are also plenty of signs that people ignore. Who, for example made cattle subservient to man? Furthermore, the ships that carry them on the sea are a sign they see with their eyes. The fate of past communities should also serve as an admonition to them. The *sūrah* then concludes with a powerful image coupled with strong rhythm, showing a community of unbelievers faced with God's might. They declared their belief, but it was too late: "*But accepting the faith after they had seen Our might was not going to benefit them at all. This has always been God's way of dealing with His creatures. There and then the unbelievers will be lost.*" (Verse 85) This is a fitting ending, one that depicts the fate of those who are arrogant.

I

A Prayer by Angels

Ghāfir (The Forgiver)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

Ḥā. Mīm. (1)

حمٓ ﴿١﴾

The revelation of this book is from God, the Almighty, the All-Knowing, (2)

تَنزِيلُ ٱلْكِتَٰبِ مِنَ ٱللَّهِ ٱلْعَزِيزِ ٱلْعَلِيمِ ﴿٢﴾

who forgives sins, accepts repentance, is severe in retribution and limitless in bounty. There is no deity other than Him. To Him is the ultimate return. (3)

غَافِرِ ٱلذَّنۢبِ وَقَابِلِ ٱلتَّوْبِ شَدِيدِ ٱلْعِقَابِ ذِى ٱلطَّوْلِ لَآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ إِلَيْهِ ٱلْمَصِيرُ ﴿٣﴾

None but the unbelievers dispute God's revelations. Let it not deceive you that they seem to be able to do as they please on earth. (4)

مَا يُجَٰدِلُ فِىٓ ءَايَٰتِ ٱللَّهِ إِلَّا ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ فَلَا يَغْرُرْكَ تَقَلُّبُهُمْ فِى ٱلْبِلَٰدِ ﴿٤﴾

Before their time the people of Noah rejected the truth, as did other groups and communities after them. Each of these communities schemed against the messenger sent to them, aiming to lay their hands on him. With false argument they strove to refute the truth, but then I took them to task. How awesome was My punishment! (5)

كَذَّبَتْ قَبْلَهُمْ قَوْمُ نُوحٍ وَٱلْأَحْزَابُ مِنۢ بَعْدِهِمْ ۖ وَهَمَّتْ كُلُّ أُمَّةٍۭ بِرَسُولِهِمْ لِيَأْخُذُوهُ ۖ وَجَٰدَلُوا۟ بِٱلْبَٰطِلِ لِيُدْحِضُوا۟ بِهِ ٱلْحَقَّ فَأَخَذْتُهُمْ ۖ فَكَيْفَ كَانَ عِقَابِ ﴿٥﴾

Thus your Lord's word shall come true against the unbelievers: they will be the dwellers in the fire of hell. (6)

وَكَذَٰلِكَ حَقَّتْ كَلِمَتُ رَبِّكَ عَلَى ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوٓا۟ أَنَّهُمْ أَصْحَٰبُ ٱلنَّارِ ﴿٦﴾

Those who bear the Throne and those around it extol their Lord's limitless glory and praise, and have faith in Him, and pray for the forgiveness of all believers: 'Our Lord! You embrace all things with [Your] grace and knowledge. Forgive, then, those who turn to You in repentance and follow Your path, and shield them from the suffering in the blazing fire. (7)

ٱلَّذِينَ يَحْمِلُونَ ٱلْعَرْشَ وَمَنْ حَوْلَهُۥ يُسَبِّحُونَ بِحَمْدِ رَبِّهِمْ وَيُؤْمِنُونَ بِهِۦ وَيَسْتَغْفِرُونَ لِلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ رَبَّنَا وَسِعْتَ كُلَّ شَىْءٍ رَّحْمَةً وَعِلْمًا فَٱغْفِرْ لِلَّذِينَ تَابُوا۟ وَٱتَّبَعُوا۟ سَبِيلَكَ وَقِهِمْ عَذَابَ ٱلْجَحِيمِ ﴿٧﴾

'And, our Lord, admit them to the gardens of perpetual bliss You have promised them, together with the righteous from among their ancestors, spouses and offspring. You alone are the Almighty, the Wise. (8)

رَبَّنَا وَأَدْخِلْهُمْ جَنَّٰتِ عَدْنٍ ٱلَّتِى وَعَدتَّهُمْ وَمَن صَلَحَ مِنْ ءَابَآئِهِمْ وَأَزْوَٰجِهِمْ وَذُرِّيَّٰتِهِمْ ۚ إِنَّكَ أَنتَ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلْحَكِيمُ ﴿٨﴾

'Shield them from all evil. Anyone whom on that day You shall shield from evil, You shall have graced with mercy. That will be the supreme triumph.' (9)

وَقِهِمُ ٱلسَّيِّـَٔاتِ ۚ وَمَن تَقِ ٱلسَّيِّـَٔاتِ يَوْمَئِذٍ فَقَدْ رَحِمْتَهُۥ ۚ وَذَٰلِكَ هُوَ ٱلْفَوْزُ ٱلْعَظِيمُ ﴿٩﴾

The unbelievers will be addressed: 'Indeed, greater than your present loathing of yourselves is God's loathing of you when you were called to the faith and you rejected it.' (10)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ يُنَادَوْنَ لَمَقْتُ ٱللَّهِ أَكْبَرُ مِن مَّقْتِكُمْ أَنفُسَكُمْ إِذْ تُدْعَوْنَ إِلَى ٱلْإِيمَٰنِ فَتَكْفُرُونَ ﴿١٠﴾

They will say: 'Our Lord! Twice have You caused us to die, just as twice You have brought us to life! Now that we have recognized our sins, is there any way out?' (11)

قَالُوا۟ رَبَّنَآ أَمَتَّنَا ٱثْنَتَيْنِ وَأَحْيَيْتَنَا ٱثْنَتَيْنِ فَٱعْتَرَفْنَا بِذُنُوبِنَا فَهَلْ إِلَىٰ خُرُوجٍ مِّن سَبِيلٍ ﴿١١﴾

[They will be told]: 'This is all because when God alone was invoked, you denied this truth; whereas, when partners were associated with Him, you believed in them! All judgement rests with God, the Exalted, the Supreme One.' (12)

ذَٰلِكُم بِأَنَّهُۥٓ إِذَا دُعِىَ ٱللَّهُ وَحْدَهُۥ كَفَرْتُمْ ۖ وَإِن يُشْرَكْ بِهِۦ تُؤْمِنُوا۟ ۚ فَٱلْحُكْمُ لِلَّهِ ٱلْعَلِىِّ ٱلْكَبِيرِ ﴿١٢﴾

هُوَ ٱلَّذِى يُرِيكُمْ ءَايَٰتِهِۦ وَيُنَزِّلُ لَكُم مِّنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ رِزْقًا ۚ وَمَا يَتَذَكَّرُ إِلَّا مَن يُنِيبُ ﴿١٣﴾

He it is who shows you His signs and sends down sustenance from the sky for you. Yet only those who turn to God will take heed. (13)

فَٱدْعُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ مُخْلِصِينَ لَهُ ٱلدِّينَ وَلَوْ كَرِهَ ٱلْكَٰفِرُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

Pray to God, then, sincere in your faith in Him alone, however hateful this may be to the unbelievers. (14)

رَفِيعُ ٱلدَّرَجَٰتِ ذُو ٱلْعَرْشِ يُلْقِى ٱلرُّوحَ مِنْ أَمْرِهِۦ عَلَىٰ مَن يَشَآءُ مِنْ عِبَادِهِۦ لِيُنذِرَ يَوْمَ ٱلتَّلَاقِ ﴿١٥﴾

High above all orders [of being] is He, the Lord of the Throne. By His own will does He bestow revelation on whomever He wills of His servants, so as to warn of the Day when all shall meet Him; (15)

يَوْمَ هُم بَٰرِزُونَ ۖ لَا يَخْفَىٰ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ مِنْهُمْ شَىْءٌ ۚ لِّمَنِ ٱلْمُلْكُ ٱلْيَوْمَ ۖ لِلَّهِ ٱلْوَٰحِدِ ٱلْقَهَّارِ ﴿١٦﴾

the Day when they shall come forth, with nothing about them concealed from God. With whom does sovereignty rest today? With God, the One who holds absolute sway over all that exists. (16)

ٱلْيَوْمَ تُجْزَىٰ كُلُّ نَفْسٍۭ بِمَا كَسَبَتْ ۚ لَا ظُلْمَ ٱلْيَوْمَ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ سَرِيعُ ٱلْحِسَابِ ﴿١٧﴾

This day each soul will be requited for what it has earned: no injustice will be done today. God is swift in reckoning. (17)

Warn them of the Day that is ever drawing near, when people's hearts will chokingly come up to the throats. The wrongdoers will have neither intimate friend nor intercessor to be heeded. (18)

وَأَنذِرْهُمْ يَوْمَ ٱلْـَٔازِفَةِ إِذِ ٱلْقُلُوبُ لَدَى ٱلْحَنَاجِرِ كَـٰظِمِينَ ۚ مَا لِلظَّـٰلِمِينَ مِنْ حَمِيمٍ وَلَا شَفِيعٍ يُطَاعُ ﴿١٨﴾

God is well aware of the most stealthy glance, and of everything the heart would conceal. (19)

يَعْلَمُ خَآئِنَةَ ٱلْأَعْيُنِ وَمَا تُخْفِى ٱلصُّدُورُ ﴿١٩﴾

God will judge in accordance with truth and justice, whereas those whom they invoke beside Him cannot judge at all. God alone hears all and sees all. (20)

وَٱللَّهُ يَقْضِى بِٱلْحَقِّ ۖ وَٱلَّذِينَ يَدْعُونَ مِن دُونِهِۦ لَا يَقْضُونَ بِشَىْءٍ ۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ هُوَ ٱلسَّمِيعُ ٱلْبَصِيرُ ﴿٢٠﴾

Clear Outline

> Ḥā. Mīm. *The revelation of this book is from God, the Almighty, the All-Knowing, who forgives sins, accepts repentance, is severe in retribution and limitless in bounty. There is no deity other than Him. To Him is the ultimate return.* (Verses 1–3)

This is the first of seven *sūrahs* that all begin with the two separate letters, *Ḥā Mīm*. In one of these seven *sūrahs* three other separate letters, *'Ayn Sīn Qāf*, are added after the initial two. We have already discussed why some *sūrahs* start with these separate letters, thereby indicating that the Qur'ān, which defies imitation, is composed of such letters which the Arabs used every day, orally and in writing, in their language.

This is followed by a statement of a fact that is frequently used in Makkan *sūrahs* given these seek to establish faith: the fact of revelation: "*The revelation of this book is from God, the Almighty, the All-Knowing.*" (Verse 2) A number of God's attributes are then stated. These are directly relevant to the subject matter of the *sūrah* and the issues it discusses:

"*the Almighty, the All-Knowing, who forgives sins, accepts repentance, is severe in retribution and limitless in bounty. There is no deity other than Him. To Him is the ultimate return.*" (Verses 2–3) In fact all the issues the *sūrah* raises relate to these attributes of God, powerfully stated at the outset to give an impression that they are well and firmly established.

Limitless in His glory, God outlines to His servants these of His attributes that have a profound effect on their lives. Thus, He raises their hopes and fears, making them feel that they are within His grasp and can never elude what He wills. The attributes highlighted here are:

> *The Almighty*: He is overpowering. No one can get the better of Him, while He has power over all things. When He decides something, nothing can stop this from occurring.
>
> *The All-Knowing*: He conducts all affairs on the basis of perfect knowledge. Nothing is hidden from Him.
>
> *He forgives sins*: He grants His forgiveness on the basis of His knowledge about those servants who deserve to be forgiven.
>
> *He accepts repentance*: When sinners repent, He accepts their repentance and bestows His grace on them, opening the door for them to address Him directly.
>
> *He is severe in retribution*: He punishes the arrogant who are hardened in sin, unwilling to show regret or seek forgiveness.
>
> *Limitless in bounty*: He bestows His limitless grace, multiplies the reward for good deeds and gives without reckoning.
>
> *There is no deity other than Him*: He alone is the Godhead who has no partners or equals.
>
> *To Him is the ultimate return*: None can evade meeting Him or escape accountability.

These attributes provide a clear outline of the interrelation between Him and His servants. They should be clear in their feelings, thoughts and understanding of how to deal with Him. Then, they will have no ambiguity about what pleases Him or incurs His anger.

In the past, those who held beliefs based on legends were at a loss in knowing how to deal with their deities, because they had no clear idea of what pleased or angered them. They pictured them as impulsive, having no clear aim or purpose, demonstrating violent reactions and causing people much worry and confusion. They resorted to charms and sacrifices in their attempts to please such deities, but could only guess about whether they were satisfied or not. By contrast, Islam provides a very clear concept, establishing a relationship between people and their true Lord, outlining His attributes, defining His will, and instructing them on how to draw closer to Him, fear His punishment and pray for His mercy, always following a straight and clear path.

The Same Old Battle

> *None but the unbelievers dispute God's revelations. Let it not deceive you that they seem to be able to do as they please on earth. Before their time the people of Noah rejected the truth, as did other groups and communities after them. Each of these communities schemed against the messenger sent to them, aiming to lay their hands on him. With false argument they strove to refute the truth, but then I took them to task. How awesome was My punishment! Thus your Lord's word shall come true against the unbelievers: they will be the dwellers in the fire of hell.* (Verses 4–6)

Having established the truth of God's oneness and His Divine attributes, the *sūrah* makes clear that this truth is accepted by all creatures. It is, in fact, firmly rooted in their nature and directly related to the nature of the universe. All creation is entirely convinced by the signs testifying to God's oneness. Only the unbelievers dispute these signs and argue about God's revelations. Thus they are a class apart, choosing to be at odds with the universe and all other creatures within it.

"*None but the unbelievers dispute God's revelations.*" (Verse 4) Throughout the entire expanse of the universe, only the unbelievers stand apart, deviating from the true path. In relation to the whole universe, they are weaker and less significant than an ant in relation to planet earth. When they stand on their own disputing God's revelations and denying His signs, the rest of the universe declares its acceptance of Him and recognizes His oneness, deriving its strength from Him. With their odd attitude, the unbelievers' fate is sealed, no matter how powerful, affluent and mighty they may appear to be: "*Let it not deceive you that they seem to be able to do as they please on earth.*" (Verse 4) They may be able to move about, gather wealth, enjoy their power and revel in easy living. However, they are ultimately doomed. The battle, if there could ever be a battle between them and the Creator of the universe, will lead to its inevitable end.

There were in former times communities that followed the same path. Their fate should make clear to the unbelievers what happens in the end to anyone who tries to stand against the power of the Almighty: "*Before their time the people of Noah rejected the truth, as did other groups and communities after them. Each of these communities schemed against the messenger sent to them, aiming to lay their hands on him. With false argument they strove to refute the truth, but then I took them to task. How awesome was My punishment!*" (Verse 5) It is the same old story, beginning with the Prophet Noah. In other words, the battle remains the same throughout all generations. This verse provides an overall picture: a message from God received with rejection and tyranny, which leads to the inevitable end. Every messenger is met by those in power in his community who do not try to justify their stance with sound argument. On the contrary, they resort to tyranny and try to do away with God's messenger. They also resort to trickery in order to deceive the masses and claim victory for themselves. Therefore, God's power intervenes and smashes them in the most amazing way: "*How awesome was My punishment!*" (Verse 5) The punishments meted out were indeed severe, leaving in their wake ruins that testify to the same. Furthermore, all this is recorded in human history.

The battle, however, is not over yet. There is a further episode in the life to come: "*Thus your Lord's word shall come true against the*

unbelievers: they will be the dwellers in the fire of hell." (Verse 6) When God's word applies to someone, it always comes true. There can be no argument about this.

Thus does the Qur'ān describe the true nature of the battle between faith and unfaith, truth and falsehood, those who advocate God's oneness and those who, against all right, behave arrogantly on earth. We then realize that this is an old and on-going battle that started at the dawn of human life. The battlefield is wider than the whole earth because the universe and all that exists in it believe in God and submit to Him. The only exceptions are those who dispute God's revelations. The two sides are far from equal: on the side of truth stand an endless line, while on the side of falsehood only a small band stands, weak and powerless even though it may appear to be able to do as it likes on earth and to possess power and authority.

The Qur'ān describes the nature of the battle so that advocates of the truth, in all generations, are reassured. They should never be deceived by the apparent might enjoyed by the forces of falsehood at any particular time, or by the outcome of a single round in the battle. Such instances after all do not reflect the complete truth. The truth is that which is described in God's book, in His own words. He is the most truthful of all speakers, and He is the Almighty, the All-Knowing.

A Universal Bond

A relevant point is that even the angels carrying God's throne and those surrounding it, who rank among the forces of faith in the universe, remember the believers among human beings, mention them in God's presence and pray for their forgiveness. They also pray to Him for the fulfilment of His promise to those believers with whom the angels share their bond of faith:

> *Those who bear the Throne and those around it extol their Lord's limitless glory and praise, and have faith in Him, and pray for the forgiveness of all believers: 'Our Lord! You embrace all things with [Your] grace and knowledge. Forgive, then, those who turn to You in repentance and follow Your path, and shield them from the*

> *suffering in the blazing fire. And, our Lord, admit them to the gardens of perpetual bliss You have promised them, together with the righteous from among their ancestors, spouses and offspring. You alone are the Almighty, the Wise. Shield them from all evil. Anyone whom on that day You shall shield from evil, You shall have graced with mercy. That will be the supreme triumph.'* (Verses 7–9)

We do not know what this throne is: we have no image of it. Nor do we know how those assigned to carry it do so or how the others are present around it. It is futile to try to determine something which is beyond the reach of human understanding or perception. No purpose can be served by arguing about something over which God has not provided information. All that can be said concerning this fact is that there are some creatures who are close to God, and these '*extol their Lord's limitless glory and praise, and have faith in Him.*' Although the fact that they are believers can be taken for granted, this is specifically mentioned in the Qur'ān to emphasize the bond between them and human believers. Having extolled God's limitless glory, these servants of God pray for the believers among humanity, requesting the best that one believer can ask for another.

They begin their supplication in a very polite way, in the process teaching us how to couch our own prayers. They say: "*Our Lord! You embrace all things with [Your] grace and knowledge.*" (Verse 7) As they address God, they make clear their request that God bestows His grace on people, that they are relying on the fact that His grace embraces all, and that His knowledge encompasses everything. Thus, they do not make any assumptions; they simply refer to God's grace and knowledge. "*Forgive, then, those who turn to You in repentance and follow Your path, and shield them from the suffering in the blazing fire.*" (Verse 7) This reference to God's forgiveness and people's repentance corresponds to the opening of the *sūrah* where God is described as the One who forgives sins and accepts repentance. Likewise, the reference to the '*suffering in the blazing fire*' corresponds to the earlier description of His retribution as being severe.

These servants of God continue with their supplications, praying now for the admission of believers among human beings into heaven,

in fulfilment of His promise to His good servants: "*Our Lord, admit them to the gardens of perpetual bliss You have promised them, together with the righteous from among their ancestors, spouses and offspring. You alone are the Almighty, the Wise.*" (Verse 8) Admission into heaven is a great triumph and means a life of bliss. When there is added to this the company of righteous ancestors, spouses and offspring, another dimension of bliss is thus granted. Moreover, this is an aspect of the unity of all believers. It is in the bond of faith that fathers, spouses and offspring are united. Without it, all their ties are severed. This part of their supplication highlights God's attributes of power and wisdom. It is this combination that determines how people are judged.

The supplication continues: "*Shield them from all evil. Anyone whom on that day You shall shield from evil, You shall have graced with mercy. That will be the supreme triumph.*" (Verse 9) Having prayed for their admission to heaven, this prayer refers to the most important point in the whole difficult process. It is evil deeds that ruin people and lead them to their doom. When God shields a believer from evil, He actually shields that believer from the consequences of such evil. This is the great mercy on the Day of Judgement, and it is only the first step to bliss and happiness. This shielding from evil is indeed the great triumph.

Hating Oneself

As the carriers of the throne and those surrounding it address their prayer to God appealing for His grace to be bestowed on believers, their brethren in faith, the unbelievers find themselves in a totally different capacity. Everyone is looking for support, but none is to be found. In fact all bonds with all beings and things in the universe are severed. They are called out so that they can listen to the rebuke coming from all directions. The arrogance they demonstrated in this life is turned now into humiliation. They want to place their hopes in someone, but none is available to encourage their hopes:

> *The unbelievers will be addressed: 'Indeed, greater than your present loathing of yourselves is God's loathing of you when you were called to the faith and you rejected it.' They will say: 'Our Lord! Twice*

> *have You caused us to die, just as twice You have brought us to life! Now that we have recognized our sins, is there any way out?' [They will be told]: 'This is all because when God alone was invoked, you denied this truth; whereas, when partners were associated with Him, you believed in them! All judgement rests with God, the Exalted, the Supreme One.'* (Verses 10–12)

The Arabic text uses the strongest word for hate. We see them addressed from all corners and told that God's loathing of them when they were called upon to believe and still rejected the faith is far stronger than their feelings of hate towards themselves as they realize to what end they have brought themselves. They realize how different their fate could have been, had they responded to the call to faith before it was too late. This reminder is exceptionally painful for them in their newly difficult situation.

Now that all delusion is gone, they realize that the only One to turn to is God Himself; and so they do: "*They will say: Our Lord! Twice have You caused us to die, just as twice You have brought us to life! Now that we have recognized our sins, is there any way out?*" (Verse 11) Their words betray their misery and despair. They call out: '*Our Lord!*' Yet they had once denied Him and rejected His message. You gave us life the first time when You breathed of Your spirit into what was dead and thus You gave it life and we became alive. Again You have given us life after we died. We are now turning to You because You are the only One who can save us from the misery we are in. We acknowledge our faults and admit our sins. Is there, then, a way out of this misery?

Their appeal betrays the direness of their situation. They are in bitter despair. They are made to see the reason for their plight: "*This is all because when God alone was invoked, you denied this truth; whereas, when partners were associated with Him, you believed in them! All judgement rests with God, the Exalted, the Supreme One.*" (Verse 12) This is what has brought you to your present position of humiliation. You denied God's oneness and attributed partners to Him. All judgement, then, rests with Him, the Exalted, the Supreme. Both attributes fit well with the position of judgement. He is Exalted above all things and Superior to all beings.

No Injustice

The *sūrah* now dwells on one of God's attributes that fits with His exalted position. The believers are instructed to address their prayers to Him, associating no partners with Him and to be sincere in their devotion to Him alone. The *sūrah* also refers to the fact of revelation so as to give a warning about the day when all mankind will be brought together for judgement, reward and punishment. On that day, all dominion and sovereignty belong to God alone:

> *He it is who shows you His signs and sends down sustenance from the sky for you. Yet only those who turn to God will take heed. Pray to God, then, sincere in your faith in Him alone, however hateful this may be to the unbelievers. High above all orders [of being] is He, the Lord of the Throne. By His own will does He bestow revelation on whomever He wills of His servants, so as to warn of the Day when all shall meet Him; the Day when they shall come forth, with nothing about them concealed from God. With whom does sovereignty rest today? With God, the One who holds absolute sway over all that exists. This day each soul will be requited for what it has earned: no injustice will be done today. God is swift in reckoning.* (Verses 13–17)

"*He it is who shows you His signs.*" (Verse 13) God's signs are seen in everything in the universe: in the great bodies such as the sun and the planets, and also in the great phenomena such as the day and night, rain, thunder and lightning. Likewise, they are seen in minute things such as the atom, cell, leaf or flower. In each of these there is a miraculous sign which appears clearly when man tries to imitate it, let alone initiate it. Never can man fully imitate even the simplest little thing God has created.

And He it is who "*sends down sustenance from the sky for you.*" (Verse 13) Of all the sustenance God sends down people know best the rain, which is the origin of life on earth and the source of food and drink. Yet there is so much more than rain that God sends down and people learn about this gradually. Part of it consists of the rays that are necessary for life on earth. Such sustenance may also include the Divine messages

that have provided guidance for mankind ever since the early stages of human life on earth. They showed man the right way and provided sound codes for living.

"*Yet only those who turn to God will take heed.*" (Verse 13) It is the one who turns to God that remembers His grace as well as His signs and revelations which the unbelievers, with hardened hearts, prefer to ignore. In connection with turning to God, the believers are instructed to pray to God alone and to be sincere in their faith, paying little heed to what the unbelievers feel or say: "*Pray to God, then, sincere in your faith in Him alone, however hateful this may be to the unbelievers.*" (Verse 14) The unbelievers will never accept that the believers should hold on sincerely to their faith in God alone and their worship of none but Him. There is no way they will accept this, no matter how much the believers try to appease them. Therefore, the believers should stay their course, praying to God alone, completely sincere and devoted. They should pay no heed to whether the unbelievers are happy with them or not, because they will never be satisfied.

The *sūrah* adds at this point the following attributes of God: "*High above all orders [of being] is He, the Lord of the Throne. By His own will does He bestow revelation on whomever He wills of His servants.*" (Verse 15) It is God alone who is exalted in His position, high above all orders of being, the Lord of the Throne who controls everything. It is He who gives His orders, which give life to hearts and souls, to those whom He chooses from among His servants. This expression refers to the revelation of the Divine message, and it highlights here the fact that God's revelations bring life to humanity. It further states that revelation is bestowed from on high to those chosen elite among God's servants. All these facts are in harmony with God's attributes mentioned earlier in the *sūrah*, stating that He is "*the Exalted, the Supreme One.*" (Verse 12)

The main task undertaken by a servant of God chosen to receive such a message is to deliver a warning: "*so as to warn of the Day when all shall meet Him.*" (Verse 15) That is the day when people will meet together, and they will also stand face to face with the deeds they did during their lives on earth, and they will meet other creatures such as the *jinn*, the angels and other types of God's creation. All of them will

meet their Lord at the time of reckoning. Hence the day is described as 'the day of the meeting'. Furthermore, it is the day when they all stand without any cover to screen their reality. Hence, no one can put up a false image: "*the Day when they shall come forth, with nothing about them concealed from God.*" (Verse 16) In fact, nothing about them is concealed from God at any time. However, at all times other than that day, they may imagine that they are covered or screened by something or other, or that what they do or say may remain secret. On that day, however, they will be truly exposed, unable to enjoy even an imaginary cover.

Therefore, on that day the arrogant and the mighty are made to face their humble reality. The whole universe stands in awe, and all creatures demonstrate their submission. Sovereignty belongs completely to God, the One who overpowers all. In fact this is true at all times. However, on that day, this fact becomes clear to all and sundry. Every tyrant of old and every conceited person will come to know and feel it. Then every sound dies down and every movement stops. A majestic voice asks a question and replies to it, as there is no one else to ask or reply: "*With whom does sovereignty rest today?*"... "*With God, the One who holds absolute sway over all that exists.*" (Verse 16)

"*This day each soul will be requited for what it has earned: no injustice will be done today. God is swift in reckoning.*" (Verse 17) An air of awe, heightened by silence spreads. All creatures listen and realize; everything is settled, the reckoning is over. This is in harmony with what the *sūrah* said at the outset about those who dispute God's revelations: "*Let it not deceive you that they seem to be able to do as they please on earth.*" (Verse 4) This is the end of unjustified arrogance, tyranny and injustice, as well as of wealth and affluence.

The *sūrah* instructs the Prophet to warn his people about this day. The instruction is given against a backdrop of an image of the Day of Resurrection when God sits alone for judgement. Up till now the *sūrah* has not addressed people directly; instead it used a reporting style:

> *Warn them of the Day that is ever drawing near, when people's hearts will chokingly come up to the throats. The wrongdoers will have neither intimate friend nor intercessor to be heeded. God is*

> *well aware of the most stealthy glance, and of everything the heart would conceal. God will judge in accordance with truth and justice, whereas those whom they invoke beside Him cannot judge at all. God alone hears all and sees all.* (Verses 18–20)

The *sūrah* describes the Day of Judgement as ever drawing near, and we perceive it to be hastening towards us. Souls are in distress, pressing against people's throats. They try to suppress their worries and fears, and the effort is difficult. Nevertheless, they can find no one to support or protect them. No one can put up a word of intercession that finds response from anyone.

They stand in full view; nothing can conceal their reality. Even a stealthy glance and a heart's secret is brought into the open: "*God is well aware of the most stealthy glance, and of everything the heart would conceal.*" (Verse 19) An eye looking stealthily will try hard to conceal its stealthy gaze, but God is well aware of it. A secret may be hidden safely in one's soul, but it is not hidden from God who knows it all.

On that day, it is God only who passes judgement in fairness. Their alleged deities have nothing to do with such judgement: "*God will judge in accordance with truth and justice, whereas those whom they invoke beside Him cannot judge at all.*" (Verse 20) His judgement is based on perfect knowledge and full awareness. He will not entertain any injustice for anyone, and He forgets nothing: "*God alone hears all and sees all.*" (Verse 20)

2

A Believer in Pharaoh's House

Have they, then, never travelled through the land and beheld what happened in the end to those who lived before them? Greater were they in power than they are, and in the impact which they left on earth. God, however, took them to task for their sins, and they had none to defend them against God. (21)

أَوَلَمْ يَسِيرُوا۟ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ فَيَنظُرُوا۟ كَيْفَ كَانَ عَٰقِبَةُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَانُوا۟ مِن قَبْلِهِمْ ۚ كَانُوا۟ هُمْ أَشَدَّ مِنْهُمْ قُوَّةً وَءَاثَارًا فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ فَأَخَذَهُمُ ٱللَّهُ بِذُنُوبِهِمْ وَمَا كَانَ لَهُم مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ مِن وَاقٍ ﴿٢١﴾

That was because their messengers came to them with all the evidence of the truth, yet they rejected it. So God took them to task. He is Powerful, Stern in retribution. (22)

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ كَانَت تَّأْتِيهِمْ رُسُلُهُم بِٱلْبَيِّنَٰتِ فَكَفَرُوا۟ فَأَخَذَهُمُ ٱللَّهُ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ قَوِىٌّ شَدِيدُ ٱلْعِقَابِ ﴿٢٢﴾

We sent Moses with Our signs and a clear authority (23)

وَلَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا مُوسَىٰ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَا وَسُلْطَٰنٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٢٣﴾

to Pharaoh, Hāmān and Korah, but they said: 'A sorcerer, a teller of lies.' (24)

إِلَىٰ فِرْعَوْنَ وَهَٰمَٰنَ وَقَٰرُونَ فَقَالُوا۟ سَٰحِرٌ كَذَّابٌ ﴿٢٤﴾

When he came to them, setting forth the truth from Us, they said: 'Kill the sons of those who share his faith, and spare only their women.' Yet the schemes of the unbelievers can only go wrong. (25)

فَلَمَّا جَآءَهُم بِٱلْحَقِّ مِنْ عِندِنَا قَالُوا۟ ٱقْتُلُوٓا۟ أَبْنَآءَ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ مَعَهُۥ وَٱسْتَحْيُوا۟ نِسَآءَهُمْ ۚ وَمَا كَيْدُ ٱلْكَٰفِرِينَ إِلَّا فِى ضَلَٰلٍ ﴿٢٥﴾

Pharaoh said: 'Leave it to me to kill Moses, and let him invoke his Lord! I fear that he will change your religion and cause corruption to spread in the land.' (26)

وَقَالَ فِرْعَوْنُ ذَرُونِىٓ أَقْتُلْ مُوسَىٰ وَلْيَدْعُ رَبَّهُۥٓ ۖ إِنِّىٓ أَخَافُ أَن يُبَدِّلَ دِينَكُمْ أَوْ أَن يُظْهِرَ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ ٱلْفَسَادَ ﴿٢٦﴾

Moses said: 'I seek refuge with Him who is my Lord and your Lord from everyone who is too arrogant and will not believe in the Day of Reckoning.' (27)

وَقَالَ مُوسَىٰٓ إِنِّى عُذْتُ بِرَبِّى وَرَبِّكُم مِّن كُلِّ مُتَكَبِّرٍ لَّا يُؤْمِنُ بِيَوْمِ ٱلْحِسَابِ ﴿٢٧﴾

A believing man of Pharaoh's family, who until then had concealed his faith, said: 'Would you kill a man because he says, "God is my Lord," when he has brought you all evidence of the truth from your Lord? If he is a liar, his lie will fall back on him; but if he is speaking the truth, something of what he warns you against is bound to befall you. God will not grace with His guidance anyone who is a lying transgressor. (28)

وَقَالَ رَجُلٌ مُّؤْمِنٌ مِّنْ ءَالِ فِرْعَوْنَ يَكْتُمُ إِيمَٰنَهُۥٓ أَتَقْتُلُونَ رَجُلًا أَن يَقُولَ رَبِّىَ ٱللَّهُ وَقَدْ جَآءَكُم بِٱلْبَيِّنَٰتِ مِن رَّبِّكُمْ ۖ وَإِن يَكُ كَٰذِبًا فَعَلَيْهِ كَذِبُهُۥ ۖ وَإِن يَكُ صَادِقًا يُصِبْكُم بَعْضُ ٱلَّذِى يَعِدُكُمْ ۖ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَا يَهْدِى مَنْ هُوَ مُسْرِفٌ كَذَّابٌ ﴿٢٨﴾

‘My people! Yours is the dominion today, having the upper hand in the land; but who will rescue us from God’s punishment should it befall us?’ Pharaoh said: ‘I am only putting before you what I see myself; and I am guiding you to none other than the path of rectitude.’ (29)

يَٰقَوۡمِ لَكُمُ ٱلۡمُلۡكُ ٱلۡيَوۡمَ ظَٰهِرِينَ
فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ فَمَن يَنصُرُنَا مِنۢ بَأۡسِ
ٱللَّهِ إِن جَآءَنَاۚ قَالَ فِرۡعَوۡنُ مَآ أُرِيكُمۡ
إِلَّا مَآ أَرَىٰ وَمَآ أَهۡدِيكُمۡ إِلَّا سَبِيلَ
ٱلرَّشَادِ ٢٩

Then said the man who believed: ‘My people! I fear for you the like of what one day befell earlier communities; (30)

وَقَالَ ٱلَّذِيٓ ءَامَنَ يَٰقَوۡمِ إِنِّيٓ أَخَافُ
عَلَيۡكُم مِّثۡلَ يَوۡمِ ٱلۡأَحۡزَابِ ٣٠

the like of what happened to Noah’s people, to the ‘Ād, and Thamūd and those who came after them. God does not will any injustice for His creatures. (31)

مِثۡلَ دَأۡبِ قَوۡمِ نُوحٖ وَعَادٖ وَثَمُودَ
وَٱلَّذِينَ مِنۢ بَعۡدِهِمۡۚ وَمَا ٱللَّهُ يُرِيدُ
ظُلۡمٗا لِّلۡعِبَادِ ٣١

‘And, my people! I fear for you the Day [of Judgement] when people will call out to one another [in distress]; (32)

وَيَٰقَوۡمِ إِنِّيٓ أَخَافُ عَلَيۡكُمۡ يَوۡمَ
ٱلتَّنَادِ ٣٢

the Day when you shall turn back and flee, with no one to defend you against God. He whom God lets go astray can never find a guide. (33)

يَوۡمَ تُوَلُّونَ مُدۡبِرِينَ مَا لَكُم مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ
مِنۡ عَاصِمٖۗ وَمَن يُضۡلِلِ ٱللَّهُ فَمَا لَهُۥ
مِنۡ هَادٖ ٣٣

'Long before this, Joseph came to you with clear evidence of the truth; but you never ceased to cast doubt on the message he brought you. When he died, you said: "God will never send any messenger after him." In this way God lets go astray those who are transgressors and live in doubt. (34)

'Those who dispute God's revelations, with no authority granted to them, commit something that is exceedingly loathsome in the sight of God and of those who believe. In this way God sets a seal on the heart of every arrogant tyrant.' (35)

Pharaoh said: 'Hāmān! Build me a lofty tower that I may attain the right means; (36)

the means of approach to the heavens, so that I may have a look at this god of Moses. I am convinced that he is lying.' Thus, goodly seemed to Pharaoh the evil of his deed, and he was barred from the right path. Pharaoh's scheming led only to ruin. (37)

وَلَقَدْ جَآءَكُمْ يُوسُفُ مِن قَبْلُ بِٱلْبَيِّنَٰتِ فَمَا زِلْتُمْ فِى شَكٍّ مِّمَّا جَآءَكُم بِهِۦ حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا هَلَكَ قُلْتُمْ لَن يَبْعَثَ ٱللَّهُ مِنۢ بَعْدِهِۦ رَسُولًا ۚ كَذَٰلِكَ يُضِلُّ ٱللَّهُ مَنْ هُوَ مُسْرِفٌ مُّرْتَابٌ ﴿٣٤﴾

ٱلَّذِينَ يُجَٰدِلُونَ فِىٓ ءَايَٰتِ ٱللَّهِ بِغَيْرِ سُلْطَٰنٍ أَتَىٰهُمْ كَبُرَ مَقْتًا عِندَ ٱللَّهِ وَعِندَ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ ۚ كَذَٰلِكَ يَطْبَعُ ٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ قَلْبِ مُتَكَبِّرٍ جَبَّارٍ ﴿٣٥﴾

وَقَالَ فِرْعَوْنُ يَٰهَٰمَٰنُ ٱبْنِ لِى صَرْحًا لَّعَلِّىٓ أَبْلُغُ ٱلْأَسْبَٰبَ ﴿٣٦﴾

أَسْبَٰبَ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ فَأَطَّلِعَ إِلَىٰٓ إِلَٰهِ مُوسَىٰ وَإِنِّى لَأَظُنُّهُۥ كَٰذِبًا ۚ وَكَذَٰلِكَ زُيِّنَ لِفِرْعَوْنَ سُوٓءُ عَمَلِهِۦ وَصُدَّ عَنِ ٱلسَّبِيلِ ۚ وَمَا كَيْدُ فِرْعَوْنَ إِلَّا فِى تَبَابٍ ﴿٣٧﴾

The man who believed said: 'My people! Follow me: I shall guide you to the path of rectitude. (38)

وَقَالَ ٱلَّذِىٓ ءَامَنَ يَٰقَوْمِ ٱتَّبِعُونِ أَهْدِكُمْ سَبِيلَ ٱلرَّشَادِ ﴿٣٨﴾

'My people! This worldly life is but a brief enjoyment, whereas the life to come is the lasting home. (39)

يَٰقَوْمِ إِنَّمَا هَٰذِهِ ٱلْحَيَوٰةُ ٱلدُّنْيَا مَتَٰعٌ وَإِنَّ ٱلْءَاخِرَةَ هِىَ دَارُ ٱلْقَرَارِ ﴿٣٩﴾

'Anyone who does a bad deed will be requited with no more than its like, whereas anyone, be it man or woman, who does righteous deeds and is a believer will enter paradise where they will receive blessings beyond reckoning. (40)

مَنْ عَمِلَ سَيِّئَةً فَلَا يُجْزَىٰٓ إِلَّا مِثْلَهَا ۖ وَمَنْ عَمِلَ صَٰلِحًا مِّن ذَكَرٍ أَوْ أُنثَىٰ وَهُوَ مُؤْمِنٌ فَأُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ يَدْخُلُونَ ٱلْجَنَّةَ يُرْزَقُونَ فِيهَا بِغَيْرِ حِسَابٍ ﴿٤٠﴾

'My people! How is it that I call you to salvation, while you call me to the fire? (41)

وَيَٰقَوْمِ مَا لِىٓ أَدْعُوكُمْ إِلَى ٱلنَّجَوٰةِ وَتَدْعُونَنِىٓ إِلَى ٱلنَّارِ ﴿٤١﴾

'You call upon me to deny God and to associate with Him others of whom I have no knowledge, the while I call you to the Almighty, the All-Forgiving. (42)

تَدْعُونَنِى لِأَكْفُرَ بِٱللَّهِ وَأُشْرِكَ بِهِۦ مَا لَيْسَ لِى بِهِۦ عِلْمٌ وَأَنَا۠ أَدْعُوكُمْ إِلَى ٱلْعَزِيزِ ٱلْغَفَّٰرِ ﴿٤٢﴾

'There is no doubt that what you call me to is not fit to be invoked either in this world or in the life to come. To God is our return, when the transgressors shall find themselves in the fire. (43)

لَا جَرَمَ أَنَّمَا تَدْعُونَنِىٓ إِلَيْهِ لَيْسَ لَهُۥ دَعْوَةٌ فِى ٱلدُّنْيَا وَلَا فِى ٱلْءَاخِرَةِ وَأَنَّ مَرَدَّنَآ إِلَى ٱللَّهِ وَأَنَّ ٱلْمُسْرِفِينَ هُمْ أَصْحَٰبُ ٱلنَّارِ ﴿٤٣﴾

'You shall then remember what I am telling you now. As for me, I commit myself to God: God is well aware of all His servants.' (44)

فَسَتَذْكُرُونَ مَآ أَقُولُ لَكُمْ ۚ وَأُفَوِّضُ أَمْرِىٓ إِلَى ٱللَّهِ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ بَصِيرٌۢ بِٱلْعِبَادِ ﴿٤٤﴾

God delivered him from the evils of their scheming, whereas grievous suffering was to encompass Pharaoh's folk: (45)

فَوَقَىٰهُ ٱللَّهُ سَيِّـَٔاتِ مَا مَكَرُوا۟ ۖ وَحَاقَ بِـَٔالِ فِرْعَوْنَ سُوٓءُ ٱلْعَذَابِ ﴿٤٥﴾

before the fire they are brought, morning and evening, and then on the Day when the Last Hour comes, it will be said: 'Cast Pharaoh's people into the worst suffering.' (46)

ٱلنَّارُ يُعْرَضُونَ عَلَيْهَا غُدُوًّا وَعَشِيًّا ۖ وَيَوْمَ تَقُومُ ٱلسَّاعَةُ أَدْخِلُوٓا۟ ءَالَ فِرْعَوْنَ أَشَدَّ ٱلْعَذَابِ ﴿٤٦﴾

They will contend with one another in the fire: the weak will say to those who were arrogant, 'We have been your followers, so can you relieve us of some share of the fire?' (47)

وَإِذْ يَتَحَآجُّونَ فِى ٱلنَّارِ فَيَقُولُ ٱلضُّعَفَٰٓؤُا۟ لِلَّذِينَ ٱسْتَكْبَرُوٓا۟ إِنَّا كُنَّا لَكُمْ تَبَعًا فَهَلْ أَنتُم مُّغْنُونَ عَنَّا نَصِيبًا مِّنَ ٱلنَّارِ ﴿٤٧﴾

The arrogant will reply: 'We are all in it together. For God has judged between His creatures.' (48)

قَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱسْتَكْبَرُوٓا۟ إِنَّا كُلٌّ فِيهَآ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ قَدْ حَكَمَ بَيْنَ ٱلْعِبَادِ ﴿٤٨﴾

Those in the fire will say to the keepers of hell: 'Pray to your Lord that He lighten this suffering of ours, though it be for one day only.' (49)

وَقَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ فِى ٱلنَّارِ لِخَزَنَةِ جَهَنَّمَ ٱدْعُوا۟ رَبَّكُمْ يُخَفِّفْ عَنَّا يَوْمًا مِّنَ ٱلْعَذَابِ ﴿٤٩﴾

They will ask: 'Did your messengers not come to you with clear evidence of the truth?' They will say: 'Yes, indeed.' [The keepers of hell] will say: 'Pray, then!' But the prayers of the unbelievers will be all in vain. (50)

قَالُوٓا۟ أَوَلَمْ تَكُ تَأْتِيكُمْ رُسُلُكُم بِٱلْبَيِّنَٰتِ ۖ قَالُوا۟ بَلَىٰ ۚ قَالُوا۟ فَٱدْعُوا۟ ۗ وَمَا دُعَٰٓؤُا۟ ٱلْكَٰفِرِينَ إِلَّا فِى ضَلَٰلٍ ﴿٥٠﴾

We shall indeed support Our messengers and the believers both in this world's life and on the Day when all the witnesses shall stand up. (51)

إِنَّا لَنَنصُرُ رُسُلَنَا وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ فِى ٱلْحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنْيَا وَيَوْمَ يَقُومُ ٱلْأَشْهَٰدُ ﴿٥١﴾

On that Day their excuses will be of no avail to the wrongdoers: their fate will be rejection, and they will have the worst of homes. (52)

يَوْمَ لَا يَنفَعُ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ مَعْذِرَتُهُمْ ۖ وَلَهُمُ ٱللَّعْنَةُ وَلَهُمْ سُوٓءُ ٱلدَّارِ ﴿٥٢﴾

And indeed, We bestowed Our guidance on Moses, and passed down the Book to the Children of Israel (53)

وَلَقَدْ ءَاتَيْنَا مُوسَى ٱلْهُدَىٰ وَأَوْرَثْنَا بَنِىٓ إِسْرَٰٓءِيلَ ٱلْكِتَٰبَ ﴿٥٣﴾

as a guide and a reminder to people of understanding. (54)

هُدًى وَذِكْرَىٰ لِأُو۟لِى ٱلْأَلْبَٰبِ ﴿٥٤﴾

Therefore, remain patient in adversity, for God's promise always comes true. Ask forgiveness for your sins, and extol your Lord's glory and praise evening and morning. (55)

فَٱصْبِرْ إِنَّ وَعْدَ ٱللَّهِ حَقٌّ وَٱسْتَغْفِرْ لِذَنۢبِكَ وَسَبِّحْ بِحَمْدِ رَبِّكَ بِٱلْعَشِىِّ وَٱلْإِبْكَٰرِ ﴿٥٥﴾

Overview

We outlined in the Prologue the theme discussed in this part of the *sūrah*. Before we discuss it in detail, we should observe that this episode from Moses' life story is closely intertwined with the main theme of the *sūrah*, and uses the same style even to the extent of employing the same phrases and expressions. The man from Pharaoh's household who concealed the fact that he was a believer following the true faith presents a number of ideas that have already been mentioned in the *sūrah*. He reminds Pharaoh, Hāmān and Korah that they were enjoying a life of comfort and authority, warning them against a fate similar to that which befell earlier communities and couples this with a warning against what may happen to them on the Day of Resurrection. He also refers to those who dispute God's revelations and how God loathes them, as do the believers; a fact also already mentioned in the *sūrah*'s first part. The *sūrah* then portrays their condition in hell, where they are humiliated, praying hard but without any response. A similar image was also given earlier. All this suggests that the logic of faith is the same across all generations, and all believers in all communities use the same arguments. This is only to be expected because the logic and the arguments are derived from the same truth. The *sūrah*, thus, carries the same ambience throughout, giving it its consistent and unique personality. Such uniqueness applies to each and every *sūrah* in the Qur'ān.

Citing an Historical Example

> *Have they, then, never travelled through the land and beheld what happened in the end to those who lived before them? Greater were they in power than they are, and in the impact which they left on earth. God, however, took them to task for their sins, and they had none to defend them against God. That was because their messengers came to them with all the evidence of the truth, yet they rejected it. So God took them to task. He is Powerful, Stern in retribution.* (Verses 21–22)

These two verses provide a bridge between what has already been discussed in the *sūrah* and the story of Moses. It serves as a reminder to

the Arabs, highlighting the lessons of history and directing them to go about in the land and reflect on the fate of those communities which in former times adopted the same attitude the Arabs showed towards the Prophet Muḥammad and his message. It states that those communities commanded superior strength and left their mark on the land. Yet their weakness was all too clear when they faced God's might. Their sins isolated them from the source of true strength and rallied against them the forces of faith, supported by God's power: "*God, however, took them to task for their sins, and they had none to defend them against God.*" (Verse 21) There is, in fact, no protection for anyone other than what is provided by faith and good action. To deny the Divine message and reject God's messengers and the clear evidence of the truth they provide will inevitably lead to ruin: "*That was because their messengers came to them with all the evidence of the truth, yet they rejected it. So God took them to task. He is Powerful, Stern in retribution.*" (Verse 22)

This general reference to earlier communities of unbelievers is followed by an example of such people whom God smote as a result of their sins. The example is provided by Pharaoh, Hāmān and Korah, together with other arrogant and tyrannical forces.

This episode from Moses' life story may be divided into sections variously outlining attitudes and depicting scenes. It begins by presenting the message to Pharaoh and his notables, but finishes in the hereafter, when they argue as they suffer the punishment of hell. It is a very long journey, but the *sūrah* highlights certain scenes from it to drive home the idea.

"*We sent Moses with Our signs and a clear authority to Pharaoh, Hāmān and Korah, but they said: A sorcerer, a teller of lies.*" (Verses 23–24) This is the attitude adopted in the first encounter: Moses, equipped with the signs given to him by God, is held in awe by all around him due to the fact that he spoke the word of truth. On the other side, however, stood Pharaoh, Hāmān and Korah with their falsehood and apparent might, guarding their positions which they felt to be threatened by this power of truth. Therefore, they resort to false argument, seeking thus to defeat the truth: "*They said: A sorcerer, a teller of lies.*" (Verse 24)

The Argument of Brute Force

The *sūrah* does not dwell on what happened after this first encounter, omitting the match with the sorcerers when Moses' staff swallowed their trickery and forced them to declare their acceptance of triumphant truth. Instead, it goes on to the situation that prevailed after these initial events: "*When he came to them, setting forth the truth from Us, they said: 'Kill the sons of those who share his faith, and spare only their women.'*" (Verse 25) A comment on this attitude is given straight away, before the verse is even finished: "*Yet the schemes of the unbelievers can only go wrong.*" (Verse 25)

Whenever tyranny is faced with a clear argument it cannot refute, it resorts to such tactics. It dreads that truth should prevail with its clear and strong arguments that appeal directly to sound human nature. Pharaoh witnessed how his sorcerers, whom he marshalled in the hope that they would defeat Moses, were the first to respond to the truth, immediately declaring themselves as believers. By contrast, Pharaoh, Hāmān and Korah said: "*Kill the sons of those who share his faith, and spare only their women.*" (Verse 25)

At the time Moses was born, Pharaoh had issued a similar decree. What we now need to consider is whether the Pharaoh who issued that decree had died and been succeeded by his son or crown prince. Furthermore, whether under this new Pharaoh, the original decree had been stopped, until Moses came back and confronted him with his message. Moses was after all known to this Pharaoh when he was a crown prince, and was aware that Moses had been brought up in the palace. He was also aware of the original decree to slay the male children of the Israelites and to spare their females. Now, his courtiers refer to this decree, advising Pharaoh to apply it in particular to those who believed with Moses, be they the sorcerers or the minority of Israelites who accepted Moses' message despite fearing Pharaoh and his forces. It is also possible that the original Pharaoh who adopted Moses was still in power, but the implementation of his decree had slackened with time or had even been suspended altogether. Now his courtiers advise him to revive it, applying it only to those who followed Moses, so that it would scare people away from Moses, the prophet.

Pharaoh himself seems to take a different point of view, or to have an additional measure which he mentioned during consultations on what tactics he would employ against Moses and his message. Essentially, he wanted to do away with Moses and rid himself of the whole problem:

> *Pharaoh said: Leave it to me to kill Moses, and let him invoke his Lord! I fear that he will change your religion and cause corruption to spread in the land.* (Verse 26)

His words, '*leave it to me to kill Moses,*' suggest that his view was not immediately accepted. Reservations might have been expressed, such as someone suggesting that killing Moses would not end the problem. On the contrary, it might inspire the masses to consider him a hero or a martyr, which could in turn generate enthusiasm towards him and his new faith, particularly after the sorcerers, who were supposed to expose his myth, declared their acceptance of his faith. One or other of Pharaoh's advisers might also have feared that Moses' God might avenge his killing and inflict punishment on his killers. This was a distinct possibility since idolaters believed in multiple deities and could imagine that Moses had a God who would punish his killers. This possibility explains Pharaoh's statement, '*let him invoke his Lord!*' Pharaoh might have meant this as a rejoinder to the objection. On the other hand, his wild remark might have merely been to show that he did not care about the consequences. His carelessness was suitably punished in the end, as we shall presently learn.

It is useful to reflect a little on Pharaoh's argument in support of his declared intention to kill Moses: "*I fear that he will change your religion and cause corruption to spread in the land.*" (Verse 26) Could there be anything more laughable than Pharaoh, the idolater, saying this of Moses, God's messenger? Yet, is it not the same statement every tyrant repeats about everyone who advocates the truth and seeks to reform people's beliefs? Is it not the word of ugly falsehood about splendid truth? What trickery seeking to shake people's faith! It is indeed the same logic repeated whenever falsehood is confronted by the truth, tyranny by justice and unfaith by faith, anywhere in the world.

For his part, Moses resorted to the secure shelter that is always extended to advocates of the truth: "*Moses said: I seek refuge with Him who is my Lord and your Lord from everyone who is too arrogant and will not believe in the Day of Reckoning.*" (Verse 27) As he said this, Moses felt reassured. He submitted himself to the One who overpowers every arrogant despot and is able to protect those who seek His shelter against arrogant enemies. He referred to God's oneness, stating it clearly, fearing nothing of the threats he received. He also referred to the rejection of the true promise that a day will inevitably come when people will have to account for their deeds. No one can resort to arrogance if they believe in the Day of Reckoning. How can they if they realize that they will stand in front of their Lord, humble, deprived of all power, without friend or intercessor?

In Defence of Moses

At this point, a man from Pharaoh's own household who had accepted the truth but kept his faith secret begins his argument in defence of Moses. In his address to Pharaoh and his courtiers, the man tries to touch their hearts with his advice and makes very convincing arguments that combine facts with the prospect of dreadful consequences.

> *A believing man of Pharaoh's family, who until then had concealed his faith, said: Would you kill a man because he says, 'God is my Lord,' when he has brought you all evidence of the truth from your Lord? If he is a liar, his lie will fall back on him; but if he is speaking the truth, something of what he warns you against is bound to befall you. God will not grace with His guidance anyone who is a lying transgressor. My people! Yours is the dominion today, having the upper hand in the land; but who will rescue us from God's punishment should it befall us? Pharaoh said: 'I am only putting before you what I see myself; and I am guiding you to none other than the path of rectitude.'*
>
> *Then said the man who believed: My people! I fear for you the like of what one day befell earlier communities; the like of what happened to Noah's people, to the 'Ād, and Thamūd and those who*

came after them. God does not will any injustice for His creatures. And, my people! I fear for you the Day [of Judgement] when people will call out to one another [in distress]; the Day when you shall turn back and flee, with no one to defend you against God. He whom God lets go astray can never find a guide. Long before this, Joseph came to you with clear evidence of the truth; but you never ceased to cast doubt on the message he brought you. When he died, you said: 'God will never send any messenger after him.' In this way God lets go astray those who are transgressors and live in doubt. Those who dispute God's revelations, with no authority granted to them, commit something that is exceedingly loathsome in the sight of God and of those who believe. In this way God sets a seal on the heart of every arrogant tyrant. (Verses 28–35)

This is a long, powerful argument advanced by a believer against the conspirators in Pharaoh's court. His argument relies on the sound logic of uncorrupted human nature. It is a skilful argument that combines caution with power. He begins first by describing the enormity of what they propose to do: "*Would you kill a man because he says, 'God is my Lord'?*" (Verse 28) Do such innocent words that imply personal conviction deserve killing the person who says them? Can such words be answered by murder? Shown in this way, your action appears to be gruesome, horrid and repugnant.

He then takes a step forward, saying that this person, Moses, supports his own statement with solid and clear evidence: "*he has brought you all evidence of the truth from your Lord.*" (Verse 28) Here, he is referring to the signs Moses had shown them. They certainly saw these signs, and when they were together, away from the masses, they could not argue about such signs nor their import.

The believer then puts to them the worst possible situation, taking an objective attitude to allow them to reflect on such a scenario: "*If he is a liar, his lie will fall back on him.*" (Verse 28) If he is lying, he will bear the consequences of his lie and suffer his punishment. However, this does not justify killing him. There is, however, the other possibility that what he says is true. It is, then, prudent to be careful and not to expose oneself to its consequences: "*but if he is speaking the truth,*

something of what he warns you against is bound to befall you." (Verse 28) Again this is the least that can be expected in this case. The man did not ask them to consider anything beyond this. His purpose was to make an objective stand, one that provided the most convincing argument.

He then delivers an implicit warning: one that applies to them and to Moses alike: "*God will not grace with His guidance anyone who is a lying transgressor.*" (Verse 28) If this applies to Moses, God will not allow him to escape unscathed. Leave him to God, then, to receive his due punishment. However, you must be careful lest you be the ones who are lying transgressors, because this will mean your inescapable doom.

The believer then gives them a strong warning against incurring God's punishment, reminding them that should it befall them, no power can avert it. Their kingdom and power will then be of little use. They should remember this and be grateful to God for having given them what they enjoyed: "*My people! Yours is the dominion today, having the upper hand in the land; but who will rescue us from God's punishment should it befall us?*" (Verse 29)

At heart, the man feels what a true believer should feel: God's punishment is closest to those who are in power. Therefore, they are the ones who should be most careful and should try their best to avoid it. It could come upon them at any moment of the night or day, so they must dread such a possibility. The man reminds them of the power and authority they enjoyed, and includes himself among them as he reminds them of God's punishment: "*Who will rescue us from God's punishment should it befall us?*" (Verse 29) He, thus, shows them that what happens to them is a matter of great concern to him; he is one of them, awaiting the same destiny. Hence, his kind and caring advice. He hopes that they will take this to heart, realizing that it is meant most sincerely, and that they stand no chance against God's punishment should it befall them.

At this point Pharaoh demonstrates the feeling that possesses any tyrant receiving honest advice. He turns in arrogance, perceiving detraction from his authority and encroachment on his dominion: "*Pharaoh said: I am only putting before you what I see myself; and I am*

guiding you to none other than the path of rectitude." (Verse 29) I am only telling you what I know to be true and useful. It is indeed the proper path to follow. Has anyone ever heard of a tyrant who did not feel that what he said was right and full of wisdom? Would any tyrant allow for someone to imagine that he be wrong? Do tyrants allow anyone to uphold a view other than theirs? How else do they become tyrants?

The believer, however, feels that it is his duty to warn and give sound advice, and to express his view lucidly. It is also his duty to stand by the truth, regardless of what tyrants say. He then tries another argument, in the hope that their hearts will soften to it and that they will begin to see the light of the truth. He refers to the fates of earlier communities of unbelievers. They testify to how powerfully God smites arrogant tyrants: "*Then said the man who believed: My people! I fear for you the like of what one day befell earlier communities; the like of what happened to Noah's people, to the 'Ād, and Thamūd and those who came after them. God does not will any injustice for His creatures.*" (Verses 30–31) Each community had its day, but the believer combines them together, making it the day when God's retribution strikes. The nature of these days is the same; hence, they are made to appear as just one day. God wills no injustice on anyone. He only punishes them for their sins, so that those who are close to them and those who come after them may take heed and follow the right course.

The man touches their hearts again, reminding them of another day, the Day of Resurrection, when everyone is calling out: "*And, my people! I fear for you the Day [of Judgement] when people will call out to one another [in distress]; the Day when you shall turn back and flee, with no one to defend you against God. He whom God lets go astray can never find a guide.*" (Verses 32–33)

On that day, the angels responsible for gathering people will be calling out to them; the people standing on the heights will call out, speaking to the people destined for heaven and to the people of hell; the people of heaven and hell will call out addressing each other. Thus, calling out takes place in different ways. Describing it as the 'day of calling out' imparts a feeling of loud clamouring emanating from everywhere, as also a day of overcrowding and dispute. The general air fits well with the believer's words: "*the Day when you shall turn back*

and flee, with no one to defend you against God." They may try to flee when they see hell, but there is no escape. Yet the image of fright and attempting to flee is the first to be shown here of those who considered themselves mighty and who behaved arrogantly, revelling in their earthly power.

"*He whom God lets go astray can never find a guide.*" (Verse 33) Do we see here an implicit reply to Pharaoh's earlier statement when he said: "*I am guiding you to none other than the path of rectitude.*" (Verse 29) This also implies that true guidance comes only from God. Whoever God lets go astray will have no one to guide him. God knows people's conditions and who of them deserves to be guided and who deserves to be left astray.

Finally, the believer reminds them of their attitude to the Prophet Joseph, Moses' ancestor. They also doubted him and his message despite the clear evidence he showed them. They must not adopt the same attitude towards Moses who is confirming what Joseph had brought them earlier. In fact, Moses' message disproves their assertions that God would not send a messenger after Joseph. For, Moses has been sent to prove them wrong: "*Long before this, Joseph came to you with clear evidence of the truth; but you never ceased to cast doubt on the message he brought you. When he died, you said: 'God will never send any messenger after him.' In this way God lets go astray those who are transgressors and live in doubt. Those who dispute God's revelations, with no authority granted to them, commit something that is exceedingly loathsome in the sight of God and of those who believe. In this way God sets a seal on the heart of every arrogant tyrant.*" (Verses 34–35)

This is the only reference in the Qur'ān to Joseph's message addressed to the people of Egypt. In the *sūrah* carrying his name we learn that he was placed in charge of Egypt's storehouses. He also carried the title of 'Azīz, which probably meant the chief minister. There is an indication in the *sūrah* that he sat on Egypt's throne, but this is not confirmed. This may be understood from the verse that says: "*And he raised his parents to the throne, and they fell down on their knees, prostrating themselves before him. He said: Father, this is the real meaning of my dream of long ago. My Lord has made it come true.*" (12: 100)

The 'throne' to which Joseph raised his parents might have been something other than Egypt's throne. Be that as it may, Joseph attained a position of power and authority. In light of all this, we can imagine the situation to which the believer in Pharaoh's household was referring: they doubted Joseph's message, but dared not deny it outright when he was the man in power. Then they said: *'God will never send any messenger after him.'* They were practically relieved when he died. Expressing their relief in this way suggests that they did not accept his message based on God's complete oneness. They asserted that God would not send another messenger after him, yet this expressed nothing but their own desire. It is often the case that people desire something and then believe it to be true.

At this juncture, the believer takes a strong stance against such hardened denials of the truth: "*In this way God lets go astray those who are transgressors and live in doubt.*" (Verse 34) He warns them that God will abandon those who continue to doubt His message after seeing clear evidence of its truth, letting them go astray. He then tells them plainly that those who continue to dispute God's revelation, without justification or evidence, will be loathed by God and the believers. Pharaoh and his people did this in a very deplorable way. He also condemns arrogance and warns against God's punishment to those who continue to behave arrogantly and resort to high-handedness. "*Those who dispute God's revelations, with no authority granted to them, commit something that is exceedingly loathsome in the sight of God and of those who believe. In this way God sets a seal on the heart of every arrogant tyrant.*" (Verse 35) These words, from a believer among Pharaoh's household, are almost identical to those at the outset of the *sūrah* speaking of how God dislikes those who dispute His revelations without any proof in support of what they say. The result is that God lets them go astray until there is no room in their hearts for the light of guidance.

Pharaoh's Manoeuvre

Despite such solid arguments from the believer, Pharaoh persisted in his erring ways, adamant in his rejection of the truth. However, he

sought to pretend that he wanted to find out whether what Moses said was true. It appears then that the believer's argument was so convincing and hard-hitting that Pharaoh and his courtiers could not totally ignore it. Therefore, Pharaoh tried to find a way out:

> *Pharaoh said: 'Hāmān! Build me a lofty tower that I may attain the right means; the means of approach to the heavens, so that I may have a look at this god of Moses. I am convinced that he is lying.' Thus, goodly seemed to Pharaoh the evil of his deed, and he was barred from the right path. Pharaoh's scheming led only to ruin.* (Verses 36–37)

Thus, Pharaoh instructed Hāmān, his minister, to build him a very high tower so that he might climb and look into the heavens searching for Moses' God. He also added: '*I am convinced he is lying.*' Pharaoh resorted to this manoeuvring so that he did not have to face the truth which would compel him to acknowledge God's oneness. Such acknowledgement would lose him his throne and dispel the legends upon which his kingdom was based. It is improbable that such was Pharaoh's understanding, or that he seriously wanted to look for Moses' God in this stupid, physical way. In fact, Pharaoh would have attained a high standard of education and knowledge. Therefore, his words really betray his ridicule on the one hand and trickery on the other. He wanted to deceive people into thinking that he was fair-minded, willing to test Moses' claims. Or perhaps this manoeuvre was meant as a retreat in the face of the strong logic advanced by the believer. Whatever is the truth behind his actions, all these possibilities indicate that he persisted in his erring ways, arrogantly denying the truth. "*Thus, goodly seemed to Pharaoh the evil of his deed, and he was barred from the right path.*" (Verse 37) He deserved to be so barred, having chosen to persist with falsehood and deviancy. The *sūrah*'s comment makes clear that such scheming can only lead to failure and utter loss. "*Pharaoh's scheming led only to ruin.*" (Verse 37)

Faced with such thoughtless and devious manoeuvring, the believer makes his final say clear, free of ambiguity. He calls on his people to

follow him in pursuing the right course leading to God. He emphasizes to them that this present life is worthless, while the life to come provides pure bliss. He warns them against the punishment of the hereafter, exposing the hollow and false nature of idolatrous beliefs:

> *The man who believed said: 'My people! Follow me: I shall guide you to the path of rectitude. My people! This worldly life is but a brief enjoyment, whereas the life to come is the lasting home. Anyone who does a bad deed will be requited with no more than its like, whereas anyone, be it man or woman, who does righteous deeds and is a believer will enter paradise where they will receive blessings beyond reckoning. My people! How is it that I call you to salvation, while you call me to the fire? You call upon me to deny God and to associate with Him others of whom I have no knowledge, the while I call you to the Almighty, the All-Forgiving. There is no doubt that what you call me to is not fit to be invoked either in this world or in the life to come. To God is our return, when the transgressors shall find themselves in the fire. You shall then remember what I am telling you now. As for me, I commit myself to God: God is well aware of all His servants.* (Verses 38–44)

These are the same facts established at the beginning of the *sūrah*. The believer restates them here as he confronts Pharaoh and his noblemen. He calls on them: "*My people! Follow me: I shall guide you to the path of rectitude.*" (Verse 38) Only a few moments earlier, it was Pharaoh who said: "*I am guiding you to none other than the path of rectitude.*" (Verse 29) This means that the believer was making a clear challenge, stating the word of truth, fearing nothing that the tyrant Pharaoh, or his two ministers, Hāmān and Korah, could do to him. He tells them of the nature of this present life: "*My people! This worldly life is but a brief enjoyment.*" (Verse 39) It cannot continue. It will soon disappear; "*whereas the life to come is the lasting home.*" (Verse 39) It is the one to be preferred.

He states for them the rule that governs reward and punishment in the life to come: "*Anyone who does a bad deed will be requited with no more than its like, whereas anyone, be it man or woman, who does*

righteous deeds and is a believer will enter paradise where they will receive blessings beyond reckoning." (Verse 40) It is out of God's grace that good deeds will be rewarded in multiples, while bad ones are requited with no more than what they actually are. God is fully aware of people's weaknesses, the temptations to which they are exposed and the impediments they have to face when they try to adhere to His guidance. Therefore, He multiplies their good deeds and makes them a means to erase their bad ones. If, after the reckoning, they attain admittance into heaven, God grants them there blessings beyond all ken.

The believer expresses his amazement that he should call them to what saves them from punishment, while they call him to what will lead him to the fire: "*My people! How is it that I call you to salvation, while you call me to the fire?*" (Verse 41) Needless to say, they did not call on him to throw himself into a fire, but they called on him to associate partners with God. The two are synonymous. Therefore, he states the other call in the next verse: "*You call upon me to deny God and to associate with Him others of whom I have no knowledge, the while I call you to the Almighty, the All-Forgiving.*" (Verse 42)

The difference between his and their calls cannot be wider. His call is clear, straight, requiring them to believe in God, the Almighty, the All-Forgiving. He calls them to believe in the One God, whose work in the universe testifies to His oneness, limitless ability and infinite power. They should believe in Him so that He will forgive them, as He is the One who forgives all. How does this contrast with what they call him to do? They call him to disbelieve in God, to associate with Him beings of whom he has no knowledge: idols, myths, legends and paradoxes.

The believer then states in all clarity that those alleged partners have no say on any matter in this present world or in the life to come. All shall return to God Almighty when those who transgress the bounds will be the dwellers of fire: "*There is no doubt that what you call me to is not fit to be invoked either in this world or in the life to come. To God is our return, when the transgressors shall find themselves in the fire.*" (Verse 43)

Thus the basic facts of the true faith are laid down, clear, free of all ambiguity. This believer unhesitatingly states them in front of Pharaoh

and his noblemen, although until then he had kept secret the fact that he believed in God. Now he declares his faith openly. What is left for him, then? Nothing other than to surrender himself to God. He has stated the truth as he knew it in the depths of his heart. He warns them that they are certain to remember his words when remembrance will avail them nothing. All matters are referred to God: "*You shall then remember what I am telling you now. As for me, I commit myself to God: God is well aware of all His servants.*" (Verse 44)

The argument is now over, for the believer from among Pharaoh's household has declared the word of truth, which remains clear and valid for the rest of time.

Who Bears the Blame?

The *sūrah* does not dwell on what happened between Moses, Pharaoh and the Children of Israel after this, up to the point of Pharaoh's drowning while Moses and his people were saved. Instead, it affords some glimpses of what happened thereafter, indeed, after life itself:

> *God delivered him from the evils of their scheming, whereas grievous suffering was to encompass Pharaoh's folk: before the fire they are brought, morning and evening, and then on the Day when the Last Hour comes, it will be said: 'Cast Pharaoh's people into the worst suffering.' They will contend with one another in the fire: the weak will say to those who were arrogant, 'We have been your followers, so can you relieve us of some share of the fire?' The arrogant will reply: 'We are all in it together. For God has judged between His creatures.' Those in the fire will say to the keepers of hell: 'Pray to your Lord that He lighten this suffering of ours, though it be for one day only.' They will ask: 'Did your messengers not come to you with clear evidence of the truth?' They will say: 'Yes, indeed.' [The keepers of hell] will say: 'Pray, then!' But the prayers of the unbelievers will be all in vain.* (Verses 45–50)

This present world is over, and we see the first event that succeeds it. We see the believer who stated the truth being saved from Pharaoh

and his aides' scheming. They could not cause him any harm in this world, nor after it. By contrast, Pharaoh's folk were engulfed by suffering: "*Before the fire they are brought, morning and evening, and then on the Day when the Last Hour comes, it will be said: Cast Pharaoh's people into the worst suffering.*" (Verse 46)

The way this verse is phrased suggests that they are brought before the fire during the time between their death and the Day of Judgement. This may be a reference to the torment suffered in the grave. The statement that follows reads: '*and then on the Day when the Last Hour comes, it will be said: Cast Pharaoh's people into the worst suffering.*' This means that this suffering precedes the Day of Judgement. It is a terrible punishment involving exposure to the fire morning and evening, either to make them expect its burning and pain, which is a terrible suffering, or to experience it, which is even worse. Then, on the Day of Judgement, they will be cast into the worst suffering.

The verse that follows tells us of something that happens after resurrection. The unbelievers are shown arguing in hell: "*The weak will say to those who were arrogant, 'We have been your followers, so can you relieve us of some share of the fire?'*" (Verse 47) This means that the weak are together with the arrogant in the fire of hell. The weak have not been spared on account of their weakness, or their being driven like cattle, having no say or choice. God granted them a position of honour, which equipped them to exercise free choice and to be responsible for what they choose. They relinquished all this and followed their arrogant leaders instead. They did not object to anything the leaders said. In fact, it did not occur to them that they could object. They did not think about what their arrogant leaders said to them, or the errors they landed them in: "*We have been your followers.*" The fact of their relinquishing responsibility and what God granted them could never serve as extenuating circumstances in God's sight. Therefore, they will be in hell, driven there by their leaders, just as they used to drive them like sheep in the life of this world. We see them asking their leaders: "*Can you relieve us of some share of the fire?*" (Verse 47) This question is a reminder of what such leaders used to assert, pledging to protect their followers against evil and harm.

Such arrogant leaders, however, are soon fed up with their weak followers requests. Their answer betrays their boredom, but nonetheless they acknowledge what has happened: "*We are all in it together. For God has judged between His creatures.*" (Verse 48)

"*We are all in it together.*" We are all weak, lacking all support and help. We are all alike. So why do you put such a question to us when you realize that the noble and the weaker elements are all the same? "*God has judged between His creatures.*" There can be no review or change to His judgement. The matter is settled. No creature can reduce or amend God's judgement.

When all realize that no refuge can be sought from God's punishment except with Him, they all humbly appeal to the guards of hell, in a way that makes them all equal: "*Those in the fire will say to the keepers of hell: Pray to your Lord that He lighten this suffering of ours, though it be for one day only.*" (Verse 49) They want the guards of hell to intercede on their behalf, hoping that their terrible ordeal can be lifted a little. They ask them to pray to God to reduce their punishment for one day, just to breathe and have a bit of rest. Even a day's reduction is worth such appeals.

The guards of hell, however, do not respond to this humble and passionate appeal. They know their limits, and they are aware of God's law and that the time is long passed. Therefore, they increase the suffering of the dwellers of hell by rebuking them and reminding them of the reasons for their suffering: "*They will ask: 'Did your messengers not come to you with clear evidence of the truth?' They will say: 'Yes, indeed.'* (Verse 50) The question and its answer suffice. There is no need for any more argument. The guards of hell leave them to their fate, allowing them to sink into despair. "*[The keepers of hell] will say: Pray, then!*" (Verse 50) If any praying will change your situation even a bit, why do you not offer such prayers yourselves? The verse concludes with a comment on such prayers: "*But the prayers of the unbelievers will be all in vain.*" (Verse 50) Such prayer is ignored, remains unanswered. Those who say it are forgotten, be they the leaders or their followers.

God's Unfailing Support

The *sūrah* then adds a comment on the whole episode and what preceded it of reference to the different communities which suffered God's punishment after taking a negative attitude towards His message.

> *We shall indeed support Our messengers and the believers both in this world's life and on the Day when all the witnesses shall stand up. On that Day their excuses will be of no avail to the wrongdoers: their fate will be rejection, and they will have the worst of homes. And indeed, We bestowed Our guidance on Moses, and passed down the Book to the Children of Israel as a guide and a reminder to people of understanding. Therefore, remain patient in adversity, for God's promise always comes true. Ask forgiveness for your sins, and extol your Lord's glory and praise evening and morning.* (Verses 51–55)

This definitive comment suits the decisive situation. We have been given an example of the end of truth and falsehood, both in this world and in the life to come. We have seen what fate befell Pharaoh and his noblemen in this life, and we have seen them disputing in hell, utterly humiliated. Such is the end of these communities, as stated in the Qur'ān: "*We shall indeed support Our messengers and the believers both in this world's life and on the Day when all the witnesses shall stand up. On that Day their excuses will be of no avail to the wrongdoers: their fate will be rejection, and they will have the worst of homes.*" (Verses 51–52)

As for the life to come, perhaps no believer in life after death will argue about this. They do not find any reason to argue. As for victory in this present world, this may need some explanation.

God's promise is clear and definitive: "*We shall indeed support Our messengers and the believers both in this world's life and...*" (Verse 51) Yet we see that some messengers were killed, and some had to abandon their homes after being rejected and driven out. Some believers have also been exposed to grievous suffering; some were thrown into the fire pit; some fell martyrs; some live in exceedingly difficult

circumstances. What happens, then, to God's promise of support being given to them in this present life? Satan tries hard to exploit this situation, working hard to shake people's faith.

People, however, use superficial measures when evaluating things, and they overlook many values and facts. They look at a brief period of time and a small area or space. These are limited human measures. A comprehensive look shows the situation to occur in a broad span of time and place. It does not erect limits between one era or place and another. If we look at the question of faith from such a broad perspective, we will see it triumphant, no doubt. Its triumph is the victory of its upholders. They have no existence separate from its existence. The first thing faith requires of them is to dedicate themselves to it completely, so that it is almost as if they disappear while it stays in full vision.

Moreover, people often limit the meaning of victory to a specific outcome they know and can easily recognize. But victory can take different forms, some of which might superficially at least appear akin to defeat. When the Prophet Abraham was thrown in the fire and remained resolute in his determination to stick to his faith and advocate it, was he in a position of victory or defeat? From a faith perspective, he was undoubtedly at the highest point of victory as he was being cast into the fire. He again triumphed when he was saved from the fire. These are two different images that appear to be poles apart, but they are in fact very close to each other. Al-Ḥusayn, the Prophet's grandson, met his martyrdom in a way that is tragic from one angle and splendid from another: so was he victorious or vanquished? On the surface, and judging by immediate considerations, it was a defeat. In reality and from a wider perspective, though, it was a true victory. No other martyr excites sympathy and feelings of support, among both Sunnīs and Shīʿah, like al-Ḥusayn. Indeed, such feelings also apply to many non-Muslims.

Many are the martyrs who achieved for their faith through martyrdom what they could never have achieved in life had they lived a thousand years. They could not impress great meanings on people's minds or motivate them to action like they did with their final sermon,

written with their own blood. Their martyrdom provided motivation for their children and grandchildren, and at times they provided the motivation to change history over several generations.[1]

What constitutes victory? What is meant by defeat? We need to review our concepts and our sense of values before we ask about whether God's promise to His messengers and to believers comes true in this present life?

Yet there are many situations where victory takes its familiar form, particularly when such form is linked to a permanent one. The Prophet Muḥammad achieved victory in his lifetime because his victory was necessary for the establishment of the faith in its full reality in human life. This faith of ours can only be brought to its fullness when it governs the life of its community. It can, thus, conduct all affairs, from those of a single heart and soul to those of state and government. It was God's will that the messenger preaching this faith should triumph during his own lifetime, so that he could establish the full form of the Islamic faith, leaving a real example for future generations. Thus, the familiar form of victory was linked in his case to a much wider one, and the two were united by God's will and according to His planning.

Another point to consider is that God's promise is given to His messengers and to believers. Thus, a prerequisite for victory is the presence of true faith in people's hearts so as to make the promise applicable to them. Yet people often overlook the significance of the truth of faith which comes into existence only when people remove all forms of idolatry. There are some very subtle forms of idolatry which can only be purged when a person is totally devoted to God, relies on Him alone and submits totally to His will in all affairs. He then feels that God guides His footsteps and that He chooses nothing other than what God has chosen for him. Thus, he accepts God's will with contentment. When a person attains this state, he does not suggest to God any particular form of victory. He

1. These words apply to the author himself and his martyrdom. He rejected all tempting offers that sought to make him change his course. His standing in the history of Islamic advocacy was greatly enhanced after his death. Indeed, his books have achieved far wider circulation after his death and have been translated into many languages. – Editor's note.

leaves the matter to God to determine. He accepts whatever befalls him as good. This is one of the meanings of victory. It is victory over one's pleasures and desires. It is an internal victory, one that is prerequisite for achieving the external victory: "*We shall indeed support Our messengers and the believers both in this world's life and on the Day when all the witnesses shall stand up. On that Day their excuses will be of no avail to the wrongdoers: their fate will be rejection, and they will have the worst of homes.*" (Verses 51–52)

We have seen in the previous image drawn how the excuses advanced by the wrongdoers were of little use to them, and how they were rejected and made to dwell in the worst of homes. Moses' story shows yet another form of victory: "*And indeed, We bestowed Our guidance on Moses, and passed down the Book to the Children of Israel as a guide and a reminder to people of understanding.*" (Verses 53–54) Providing guidance and passing the book down to them was a form of victory that clearly reflects the breadth of its scope.

The final note in this part of the *sūrah* is given in the form of a directive to the Prophet and the believers facing much hardship in Makkah, and to all future generations of believers who face such hardship: "*Therefore, remain patient in adversity, for God's promise always comes true. Ask forgiveness for your sins, and extol your Lord's glory and praise evening and morning.*" (Verse 55) Remain patient in adversity, whether this adversity takes the form of rejection of the message, denying its truth, or the infliction of physical harm. Remain patient when you are unable to check falsehood that appears to enjoy wealth and power for a period of time. Bear with patience what you have to face of people's rough attitudes and behaviour. Check your own desire to achieve a quick victory. Remain patient as you may have to face many difficulties caused by friends, if not by enemies.

"*Remain patient in adversity, for God's promise always comes true.*" (Verse 55) It may appear slow coming; matters may become complicated; prospects may become gloomy; yet it is the promise of the One who can fulfil it, and whose will it has been to make the promise. As you go along your way, take the necessary equipment: "*Ask forgiveness for your sins, and extol your Lord's glory and praise evening and morning.*" (Verse 55) This is what is of most benefit

along the hard way of patience; seeking forgiveness of one's sins and extolling God's praise and glory. While this serves to refine our hearts and feelings, it also ensures a positive response. Indeed, it is through such seeking of forgiveness and extolling of God's praise and glory that victory is achieved within our selves, to be followed by victory in life.

The evening and morning are specified either as a reference to all time, since these are the two ends of the day, or because these are times when hearts are calm and reflective. They can, thus, appreciate God's greatness better.

Such is the way, then, that God has chosen to provide the necessary equipment for achieving victory.

3

Always Responding to Prayers

As for those who dispute God's revelations, with no authority granted to them, there is nothing in their hearts but a quest for a greatness they will never attain. Seek, then, refuge with God, for He is the One who hears all and sees all. (56)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ يُجَٰدِلُونَ فِىٓ ءَايَٰتِ
ٱللَّهِ بِغَيْرِ سُلْطَٰنٍ أَتَىٰهُمْ ۙ إِن فِى
صُدُورِهِمْ إِلَّا كِبْرٌ مَّا هُم
بِبَٰلِغِيهِ ۚ فَٱسْتَعِذْ بِٱللَّهِ ۖ إِنَّهُۥ
هُوَ ٱلسَّمِيعُ ٱلْبَصِيرُ ﴿٥٦﴾

The creation of the heavens and the earth is indeed greater than the creation of man; yet most people do not understand. (57)

لَخَلْقُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ أَكْبَرُ
مِنْ خَلْقِ ٱلنَّاسِ وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ
ٱلنَّاسِ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٥٧﴾

The blind and the seeing are not equal; nor can those who believe and do good works and those who do evil be deemed equal. How seldom you reflect. (58)

وَمَا يَسْتَوِى ٱلْأَعْمَىٰ وَٱلْبَصِيرُ
وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَعَمِلُوا۟ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ
وَلَا ٱلْمُسِىٓءُ ۚ قَلِيلًا مَّا تَتَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿٥٨﴾

The Last Hour is sure to come: of this there is no doubt. Yet most people will not believe. (59)

إِنَّ ٱلسَّاعَةَ لَءَاتِيَةٌ لَّا رَيْبَ فِيهَا وَلَٰكِنَّ
أَكْثَرَ ٱلنَّاسِ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿٥٩﴾

وَقَالَ رَبُّكُمُ ٱدْعُونِىٓ أَسْتَجِبْ لَكُمْ ۚ
إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ يَسْتَكْبِرُونَ عَنْ عِبَادَتِى
سَيَدْخُلُونَ جَهَنَّمَ دَاخِرِينَ ﴿٦٠﴾

Your Lord says: 'Call on Me, and I shall answer you. Those who are too proud to worship Me shall enter hell humiliated.' (60)

ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِى جَعَلَ لَكُمُ ٱلَّيْلَ
لِتَسْكُنُوا۟ فِيهِ وَٱلنَّهَارَ
مُبْصِرًا ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَذُو فَضْلٍ
عَلَى ٱلنَّاسِ وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ
ٱلنَّاسِ لَا يَشْكُرُونَ ﴿٦١﴾

It is God who has made for you the night in which to rest, and the day to make you see. God is limitless in His bounty to man, but most people do not give thanks. (61)

ذَٰلِكُمُ ٱللَّهُ رَبُّكُمْ خَٰلِقُ كُلِّ
شَىْءٍ لَّآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ ۖ فَأَنَّىٰ تُؤْفَكُونَ ﴿٦٢﴾

Such is God, your Lord, the Creator of all that exists: there is no deity other than Him. How deluded can you be? (62)

كَذَٰلِكَ يُؤْفَكُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَانُوا۟ بِـَٔايَٰتِ
ٱللَّهِ يَجْحَدُونَ ﴿٦٣﴾

Such it is: far deluded are those who knowingly deny God's revelations. (63)

ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِى جَعَلَ لَكُمُ ٱلْأَرْضَ
قَرَارًا وَٱلسَّمَآءَ بِنَآءً وَصَوَّرَكُمْ
فَأَحْسَنَ صُوَرَكُمْ وَرَزَقَكُم مِّنَ
ٱلطَّيِّبَٰتِ ۚ ذَٰلِكُمُ ٱللَّهُ رَبُّكُمْ ۖ
فَتَبَارَكَ ٱللَّهُ رَبُّ ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٦٤﴾

It is God who has made the earth a resting place for you and the sky a canopy. He has moulded you into a comely shape and provided you with wholesome things. Such is God, your Lord. So glory be to God, the Lord of all the worlds. (64)

He is the Ever-Living. There is no deity other than Him. So call on Him, sincere in your faith in Him. All praise is due to God, the Lord of all the worlds. (65)

هُوَ ٱلْحَىُّ لَآ إِلَـٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ فَٱدْعُوهُ مُخْلِصِينَ لَهُ ٱلدِّينَ ۗ ٱلْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ ٱلْعَـٰلَمِينَ ﴿٦٥﴾

Say: 'Since all evidence of the truth has come to me from my Lord, I am forbidden to worship those whom you invoke instead of God. I am commanded to submit to the Lord of all the worlds.' (66)

قُلْ إِنِّى نُهِيتُ أَنْ أَعْبُدَ ٱلَّذِينَ تَدْعُونَ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ لَمَّا جَآءَنِىَ ٱلْبَيِّنَـٰتُ مِن رَّبِّى وَأُمِرْتُ أَنْ أُسْلِمَ لِرَبِّ ٱلْعَـٰلَمِينَ ﴿٦٦﴾

It is He who creates you out of dust, then out of a gamete, then out of a clinging cell mass; and then He brings you forth as infants. He then lets you reach maturity, and then grow old – although some of you die earlier. [All this He ordains] so that you may reach your appointed term, and you may use your reason. (67)

هُوَ ٱلَّذِى خَلَقَكُم مِّن تُرَابٍ ثُمَّ مِن نُّطْفَةٍ ثُمَّ مِنْ عَلَقَةٍ ثُمَّ يُخْرِجُكُمْ طِفْلًا ثُمَّ لِتَبْلُغُوٓا۟ أَشُدَّكُمْ ثُمَّ لِتَكُونُوا۟ شُيُوخًا ۚ وَمِنكُم مَّن يُتَوَفَّىٰ مِن قَبْلُ ۖ وَلِتَبْلُغُوٓا۟ أَجَلًا مُّسَمًّى وَلَعَلَّكُمْ تَعْقِلُونَ ﴿٦٧﴾

It is He who ordains life and death. When He wills something to be, He only says to it, 'Be', and it is. (68)

هُوَ ٱلَّذِى يُحْىِۦ وَيُمِيتُ ۖ فَإِذَا قَضَىٰٓ أَمْرًا فَإِنَّمَا يَقُولُ لَهُۥ كُن فَيَكُونُ ﴿٦٨﴾

Do you not see how those who dispute God's revelations are turned away from the truth? (69)

أَلَمْ تَرَ إِلَى ٱلَّذِينَ يُجَـٰدِلُونَ فِىٓ ءَايَـٰتِ ٱللَّهِ أَنَّىٰ يُصْرَفُونَ ﴿٦٩﴾

Those who reject the Book and the messages We sent through Our messengers. They will certainly come to know (70)

ٱلَّذِينَ كَذَّبُوا۟ بِٱلْكِتَـٰبِ وَبِمَآ أَرْسَلْنَا بِهِۦ رُسُلَنَا ۖ فَسَوْفَ يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٧٠﴾

when, with chains and shackles round their necks, they will be dragged (71)

إِذِ ٱلْأَغْلَـٰلُ فِىٓ أَعْنَـٰقِهِمْ وَٱلسَّلَـٰسِلُ يُسْحَبُونَ ﴿٧١﴾

into scalding water, and then burnt in the fire of hell. (72)

فِى ٱلْحَمِيمِ ثُمَّ فِى ٱلنَّارِ يُسْجَرُونَ ﴿٧٢﴾

Then they will be asked: 'Where now are those to whom you ascribed divinity (73)

ثُمَّ قِيلَ لَهُمْ أَيْنَ مَا كُنتُمْ تُشْرِكُونَ ﴿٧٣﴾

side by side with God?' They will answer: 'They have forsaken us, or rather, what we used to invoke were nothing.' Thus does God let the unbelievers go astray. (74)

مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ ۖ قَالُوا۟ ضَلُّوا۟ عَنَّا بَل لَّمْ نَكُن نَّدْعُوا۟ مِن قَبْلُ شَيْـًٔا ۚ كَذَٰلِكَ يُضِلُّ ٱللَّهُ ٱلْكَـٰفِرِينَ ﴿٧٤﴾

'This is because on earth you took delight in things that are untrue and you were insolent. (75)

ذَٰلِكُم بِمَا كُنتُمْ تَفْرَحُونَ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ بِغَيْرِ ٱلْحَقِّ وَبِمَا كُنتُمْ تَمْرَحُونَ ﴿٧٥﴾

'Enter now the gates of hell, where you shall abide. Evil indeed is the abode of the arrogant.' (76)

ٱدْخُلُوٓا۟ أَبْوَٰبَ جَهَنَّمَ خَـٰلِدِينَ فِيهَا ۖ فَبِئْسَ مَثْوَى ٱلْمُتَكَبِّرِينَ ﴿٧٦﴾

Hence, remain patient in adversity, for God's promise always comes true. Whether We show you something of what We hold in store for them or We cause you to die before that, it is to Us that they shall all return. (77)

Overview

This part of the *sūrah* is closely linked to the previous one. It is, in fact, a continuation of the last point in that passage. It further directs the Prophet to remain patient as he faced adversity in the shape of rejection and physical harm. It also directs him to remain patient when the unbelievers used every means to prevent others from accepting the truth and even boasted about falsehood. Having made this directive, the *sūrah* explains the real reason for disputing God's revelations without any sound basis. In short, it is nothing but arrogance and conceit that prevent people from acknowledging the truth. Yet they cannot even attain the status to which, in their arrogance, they aspire.

The *sūrah*, therefore, emphasizes the greatness of the universe created by God, and the smallness of all mankind, compared to the heavens and the earth. In this part, the *sūrah* highlights some of the universal signs and how God, by His grace, has made them subservient to man even though man is much smaller and weaker than them. The *sūrah* also refers to aspects of God's grace within man himself. In all, these aspects confirm the oneness of the Creator.

The Prophet is then directed to proclaim God's oneness and to turn his back on what the unbelievers worshipped beside God. This part then adds a powerful scene of the Day of Resurrection, when the idolaters are rebuked for associating partners with God. The conclusion in this part is the same as in the previous one: a directive to the Prophet to remain patient in adversity, whether God keeps him alive until he has witnessed the realization of some of what He has promised or gathers him to Himself before that. This is something that God determines. All will ultimately return to Him.

Small Fry but Arrogant

As for those who dispute God's revelations, with no authority granted to them, there is nothing in their hearts but a quest for a greatness they will never attain. Seek, then, refuge with God, for He is the One who hears all and sees all. The creation of the heavens and the earth is indeed greater than the creation of man; yet most people do not understand. The blind and the seeing are not equal; nor can those who believe and do good works and those who do evil be deemed equal. How seldom you reflect. The Last Hour is sure to come: of this there is no doubt. Yet most people will not believe. Your Lord says: 'Call on Me, and I shall answer you. Those who are too proud to worship Me shall enter hell humiliated.' (Verses 56–60)

Man often forgets the fact that he is a small, weak creature and that whatever strength he may have does not emanate from within himself, but from his bond with God, the source of all strength and power. He may sever this bond and begin to swell and take on airs. Arrogance, thus, begins to establish itself within him. Satan, who doomed himself as a result of his arrogance, works on man to increase his arrogance knowing that through it he can bring man to ruin.

The unbeliever disputes God's revelations even when they are clear, addressing human nature with the sort of argument that appeals to it. He also claims to himself and others that he is only raising questions because he is not as yet convinced. However, God who knows the inner feelings and secret thoughts of all His creatures makes clear that all this is the result of man's arrogance. It is such arrogance which prompts man to argue and dispute God's revelations over which there can be no dispute. Such arrogance also drives man to aspire to what is beyond his status and what his nature cannot attain. Yet he has no solid basis for such argument for it is rooted deeply in nothing but his own arrogance: "*As for those who dispute God's revelations, with no authority granted to them, there is nothing in their hearts but a quest for a greatness they will never attain.*" (Verse 56)

If only man would understand the truth about himself and the universe, recognizing his role and not trying to exceed it, appreciating

that he is one of countless creatures each doing their role by God's will and according to His design which He alone knows, he would certainly feel relaxed, humble, living in peace with himself and with the world around him. If he did this, he would easily and readily submit himself to God. He would also do this without any hesitation.

"*Seek, then, refuge with God, for He is the One who hears all and sees all.*" (Verse 56) Seeking refuge with God against arrogance is indicative of how gruesome it is. We seek God's refuge in order to escape what is ghastly, horrible and evil. Arrogance combines all these. Moreover, it is hard for the arrogant person and for those around him. It causes harm to the heart in which it stirs and to other people's hearts. It is an evil we should seek refuge with God from. God hears all and sees all. Arrogance is normally manifested in visible action and audible words. Therefore, it is left to God to decide upon it as He pleases.

Man is then told of his true position in this great universe: how small he is in comparison to some of God's creatures, the great magnitude of which is readily visible and better appreciated on careful examination: "*The creation of the heavens and the earth is indeed greater than the creation of man; yet most people do not understand.*" (Verse 57) The heavens and the earth are there for man to see and to measure himself in relation to them. When he knows the reality of the proportions of distance, dimension, size and power, he reduces his pride, feels his smallness and almost disappears. He can only hold his own when he remembers the superior element God has granted him, and for which He has honoured him. It is this element alone that allows man to stand on his feet in front of the greatness that is the universe.

A quick glance at the universe is sufficient to appreciate all this. The earth on which we live is merely a small satellite of the sun: its mass compared to the mass of the sun is no more than three to a million, while its size is one-millionth of the size of the sun. Yet the sun is only one of around one hundred million suns our galaxy includes. Man now knows that there are around one hundred million such galaxies dispersed in the great expanse of the universe. Still, what we have discovered of the universe is merely a small part; it is so great that we become dazed when we even try to imagine it. The distance between

us and the sun is about 93 million miles. The sun is the head of the family of our planet earth, and most probably the sun is the mother of the earth. Therefore the earth remains close to its mother, standing merely 93 million miles away from it!

The diameter of our galaxy is measured at one hundred billion light years, with one light year measuring 5.8 billion miles, because light travels at the speed of 186,000 miles per second. The closest galaxy to our own is around 750,000 light years away.

We may say again that these distances and dimensions are the best man's little knowledge has determined. Scientists acknowledge that all their discoveries cover only a small part of this great universe.

God says to us: "*The creation of the heavens and the earth is indeed greater than the creation of man; yet most people do not understand.*" (Verse 57) When we speak of God's power and ability, the concepts of greater or smaller, harder or easier do not apply. He creates everything by a single word, 'Be!' The reference here is to how things appear in themselves and how people see and measure them. How does man compare to this great expanse of the universe? How high can his arrogance take him in God's great creation?

"*The blind and the seeing are not equal; nor can those who believe and do good works and those who do evil be deemed equal.*" (Verse 58) The one who is able to see learns and understands, recognizing his station. He does not give himself airs, nor does he allow conceit to distort his judgement. By contrast, a blind person cannot recognize his position in relation to his surroundings. Therefore, he misjudges his position and what is around him. The same applies to those believers who do good works and those who do evil. The first group see things for what they are and form accurate ideas, while the other group misjudges all due to their blind ignorance. They harm themselves and others, and above all they assign to themselves an erroneous position in relation to their environment. They are blind, for true blindness is that of the mind: "*How seldom you reflect.*" (Verse 58) Had we reflected, we would have known. The whole thing is clear, needing only some reflection before it becomes totally apparent.

If only we would remember the hereafter, be certain of its coming, reflect on our position then and recall how we will then stand ... "*The*

Last Hour is sure to come: of this there is no doubt. Yet most people will not believe." (Verse 59) Because they do not believe, they argue and give themselves airs; they do not submit to the truth and do not limit themselves to their rightful position.

Addressing our worship to God, praying and appealing to Him, are all means to cure hearts of arrogance, which is the evil that leads people to dispute His revelations and signs without any clear evidence. God opens the door for us to address and pray to Him. He tells us that He has committed Himself to respond to those who pray to Him, warning those who are too proud that they will be made to suffer total humiliation: "*Your Lord says: Call on Me, and I shall answer you. Those who are too proud to worship Me shall enter hell humiliated.*" (Verse 60)

Supplication and prayer must observe certain manners. Hearts must be totally dedicated to God, reassured that He will answer our prayer. We must not suggest a particular form or time or circumstance for answering it. To make such a suggestion is improper when appealing to God. We should be clear in our minds that it is a blessing that we address our prayers to God, and that His response is another blessing. 'Umar used to say: "I am not worried about my prayer being answered. I am worried about addressing my prayer. Once I am inspired to pray to God, prayer will be answered." These are the words of someone who has insight, knowing that when God wills to respond to someone's prayer, He also wills that person to pray to Him. The two are concurrent.

Those who are too proud to pray to God and appeal to Him deserve their just reward, which leads them to enter hell in total humiliation. Such is the fitting end of the arrogance that fills some hearts in this small planet and short life, forgetting the greatness of God's creation, let alone His own greatness. It is suitable requital for forgetting the Last Hour, which will inevitably come.

Blessings of All Sorts

The *sūrah* now speaks about certain aspects of God's blessings which testify to His greatness, yet the unbelievers do not offer thanks to

Him for such blessings. On the contrary, they are too proud to address their worship to Him:

> *It is God who has made for you the night in which to rest, and the day to make you see. God is limitless in His bounty to man, but most people do not give thanks. Such is God, your Lord, the Creator of all that exists: there is no deity other than Him. How deluded can you be? Such it is: far deluded are those who knowingly deny God's revelations. It is God who has made the earth a resting place for you and the sky a canopy. He has moulded you into a comely shape and provided you with wholesome things. Such is God, your Lord. So glory be to God, the Lord of all the worlds. He is the Ever-Living. There is no deity other than Him. So call on Him, sincere in your faith in Him. All praise is due to God, the Lord of all the worlds.* (Verses 61–65)

The night and day are two universal phenomena, while the earth and the heavens are creatures in the universe. They are all mentioned alongside God's creation of man, who has been given a comely shape, been provided with wholesome sustenance. All these are mentioned within the context of God's oneness and being sincere in our faith in Him. This indicates that all these phenomena, creatures and concepts are interlinked. They should be looked at within their broad environment, noting their mutual interrelations.

The fact that the universe is built on the solid basis God has given it, and its following the course God has assigned to it, allowed life to emerge, evolve and progress on earth. It also allowed human life to take the shape and form familiar to us. It fits with man's needs dictated by his nature and make-up. It has made the night a time for his rest and recuperation, while the day, with its light, a time for movement and action. It has made the earth stable as a field of activity, while the skies are raised like a canopy that does not fall apart. All the necessary proportions are maintained; otherwise, man's existence on earth would have been endangered or impossible. It has allowed wholesome provisions to grow on earth or come down from the sky for man's enjoyment. Moreover, it is God's will that gave man his comely shape and a wealth

of abilities that are in harmony with what is in the universe. All these matters are interlinked, which is the reason for referring to them together in the Qur'ān. Indeed, the Qur'ān makes this interrelation between them evidence of the Creator's oneness. It directs our hearts to call on God, sincere in our devotion, declaring that all praise is due to God, the Lord of all the worlds. It states that the One who creates all these and establishes such harmony between them is the only one to deserve to be a deity. He is indeed God Almighty, the Lord and Creator of all. How can people be turned away from this truth?

It is perhaps useful here to mention some aspects of the harmony and interrelation evident within the universe and their bearing on man's life.

> If the earth did not rotate facing the sun, there would be no succession of night and day. Had the rotation of the earth been at a higher speed than it actually is, houses would have shattered, and indeed the earth itself would have fallen apart and scattered in space. Had its rotation been slower, mankind would have perished from hot or cold weather. Indeed the current speed of its rotation is the one most suitable for the continuity of plant, animal and human life in its broadest sense. If the earth stopped rotating, all seas and oceans would be without water.[2]

What would happen if the earth's axis became straight and the earth orbited the sun in a circle where the sun would be at the centre? The seasons would be lost and people would not know summer from winter, spring from autumn.[3]

Had the crust of the earth been ten feet thicker, there would be no oxygen, without which animal life is impossible; and had the ocean been a few feet deeper, carbon dioxide and oxygen would have been absorbed and vegetable life on the surface of the land could not exist...

2. Zakī, Aḥmad, *Ma'a Allāh fī al-Samā'* [With God in Heaven]. The author gives no other details about this quotation. I managed to locate a copy of this book, only to discover that this quotation is taken from different pages, with practically every sentence from a different page. The copy I have seen is published by Dār al-Hilāl, Cairo, but it is not dated. Perhaps the author referred to an earlier edition. – Editor's note.

3. Ibid., pp. 88–89.

If the atmosphere had been much thinner, some of the meteors which are now burned in the outer atmosphere by the millions every day would strike all parts of the earth. They travel from six to forty miles a second and would set fire to every burnable object. If they travelled as slowly as a bullet, they would all hit the earth and the consequences would be dire. As for man, the impact of a tiny meteor travelling ninety times as fast as a bullet would tear him in pieces by the heat of its passage.[4]

If, for instance, instead of 21 per cent oxygen [there] were 50 per cent or more of the atmosphere, all combustible substances in the world would become inflammable to such an extent that the first stroke of lightning to hit a tree would ignite the forest, which would almost explode. If it were reduced to 10 per cent or less, life might through the ages have adjusted itself to it, but few of the elements of civilization now so familiar to man, such as fire, would be available.[5]

There are thousands of fine balances in the design of the universe that are necessary for human life. If any of them is disturbed only slightly, human life as we know it would not be possible.

As for man, one of the elements of his perfect shape is his unique form among all living things. His constitution enables his systems to fulfil their functions easily and meticulously. Moreover, the harmony between him and his surroundings is perfect, allowing him to live and act within his environment. All this may be added to his most fundamental and unique quality that enables him to be in charge of planet earth. He is equipped with the tools necessary for the fulfilment of his task, having been given a mind and spiritual contact with what is beyond the physical.

If we were to study the great accuracy of the human constitution and the harmony between the different parts and systems of man's body, relating it to the Qur'ānic statement: "*He has moulded you into a comely shape*", (Verse 64) we would need to reflect at length on every small organ, and indeed on every single cell in this marvellous creature. Take for example man's jaw and how teeth are placed in it:

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4. Morrison, A. Cressy, *Man Does Not Stand Alone*, Kingswood, Surrey, 1962, pp. 27–28.
5. Ibid., p. 30.

the jaw is so finely shaped that if the gum or the tongue were to protrude by one tenth of a millimetre this would be enough to make the gum or the tongue unfit within the mouth. A protrusion of similar thickness in a tooth or a molar will bring it into friction with the opposite tooth or molar. Take, for example, something as thin as a cigarette paper which when pressed between the upper and lower jaws is left with marks on it. As the two jaws close they press against any object between them even if its thickness is no more than that of the finest paper.

Man's constitution is equipped to live on this planet. His eyes are made to receive the light frequency which he needs to see. His ears pick up the sound frequencies he needs to hear. Every single organ in his constitution is designed for the environment in which he lives, with a limited ability to adapt to changing conditions. Man is created to live in this particular environment and to have a mutual impact on it. There is a close relationship between him and his environment, i.e. with the earth and the skies. Therefore, the Qur'ān mentions man's shape in the same verse in which it mentions the earth and sky. How fitting!

Let us now briefly discuss the text itself: "*It is God who has made for you the night in which to rest, and the day to make you see.*" (Verse 61) Rest at night is necessary for every living thing. A period of darkness is needed so that living cells can rest before resuming their activity during the day. Sleeping is not enough to afford the needed rest; darkness is also necessary. A living cell that is exposed to light continuously reaches a degree of fatigue that ruins its structure.

"*And the day to make you see.*" (Verse 61) A literal translation would render this phrase as, 'and the day able to see.' The expression brings the day alive as if it is a living entity that can look at and see things. In fact, it is people that can see during the day, but this quality is given to the day itself because it is almost universal.

The succession of the day and the night in this way is a blessing that involves further blessings. Had one or the other of them stretched permanently, or if it were merely several times as long, life would come to an end. It is fitting, then, that the succession of day and night is often mentioned within the context of God's blessings for which most

people do not give thanks: "*God is limitless in His bounty to man, but most people do not give thanks.*" (Verse 61)

These two phenomena are brought into existence by the One who alone deserves to be named God: "*Such is God, your Lord, the Creator of all that exists: there is no deity other than Him. How deluded can you be?*" (Verse 62) People do recognize God's hand in everything, and they know for certain that He is the Creator of all. Such knowledge, in fact, forces itself on our minds by the very existence of things. No one can claim to have created these, and it is impossible that they could have come into existence of their own accord. It is most amazing then that people should turn away from believing in God: "*How deluded can you be?*" Yet, this does happen: people turn away from the clear truth, in the same way as some of those who were the first to be addressed by the Qur'ān turned away. This takes place throughout all generations, without reason or evidence: "*Such it is: far deluded are those who knowingly deny God's revelations.*" (Verse 63)

The *sūrah* then mentions the universal design that gives the earth and the sky their respective functions: "*It is God who has made the earth a resting place for you and the sky a canopy.*" (Verse 64) The earth is a place suited for man's life, considering the many balances operating in it, some of which we have briefly discussed. The sky is a structure with careful proportions, dimensions and cycles to ensure stability and the continuity of human life. Indeed human life is taken into consideration in the design of the universe itself.

Furthermore, the *sūrah* specifies a link between the structure of the heavens and earth on the one hand and man's constitution and the wholesome provisions made for him on the other: "*He has moulded you into a comely shape and provided you with wholesome things.*" (Verse 64) These blessings and provisions are followed by a comment similar to the earlier one: "*Such is God, your Lord. So glory be to God, the Lord of all the worlds.*" (Verse 64) He is the One who creates, measures and designs, giving you a specified place in His kingdom. He is your Lord, so glorify Him. His bounty encompasses all worlds.

"*He is the Ever-Living.*" (Verse 65) His life is from Himself, neither gained nor created, without a beginning or an end. It does not alter,

change or finish. Nothing else has such qualities to its life. All glory to Him; unique is His life.

Again He alone is the Godhead. The One who has a unique life is God: "*There is no deity other than Him.*" Therefore, "*call on Him, sincere in your faith in Him.*" And when you pray to Him, give Him due praise: "*All praise is due to God, the Lord of all the worlds.*" (Verse 65)

Definitive Declaration

The Prophet is given clear instructions to declare to his people that he has been forbidden to worship what they invoke other than God. He has also been commanded to submit himself to the Lord of all the worlds:

> *Say: Since all evidence of the truth has come to me from my Lord, I am forbidden to worship those whom you invoke instead of God. I am commanded to submit to the Lord of all the worlds.* (Verse 66)

He is to declare to those who turn away from God's revelations and deny His blessings that he has been ordered not to worship the ones they invoke instead of God. He is to tell them that he has acted on this prohibition '*since all evidence of the truth has come to me from my Lord.*' He has the evidence, and he believes in it. It is right that he should then declare the word of truth. The prohibition to worship anyone other than God denotes a negative action, while submission to God Almighty is a positive one. It is from these two opposite parts that faith is brought to its fullness.

Having highlighted certain signs of God in the wide universe, the *sūrah* now highlights a sign from within man himself. It is the miracle of human life and its marvellous stages. This is given here by way of a prelude to stating the true nature of life granted by God:

> *It is He who creates you out of dust, then out of a gamete, then out of a clinging cell mass; and then He brings you forth as infants. He then lets you reach maturity, and then grow old – although some of you die earlier. [All this He ordains] so that you may reach your*

> *appointed term, and you may use your reason. It is He who ordains life and death. When He wills something to be, He only says to it, 'Be', and it is.* (Verses 67–68)

This beginning of human life includes facts that man's knowledge could not know because they took place before his existence, and others which man sees and monitors. Yet such monitoring started only recently, centuries after the revelation of the Qur'ān.

That man was created out of dust refers to a fact taking place before his existence. Dust is the origin of all life on earth, including human life. Only God knows how this miracle was accomplished, and how this great event took shape. As for subsequent procreation, this takes place when a male's sperm fertilizes a female's egg. Conception takes place and a cell mass clings to the uterus. At the end, a baby is born after having gone through a number of major development stages. When carefully considered in comparison to what happens after birth, these stages appear to be longer and greater than the stages we go through from birth till death. The *sūrah* mentions some of these latter stages: childhood, full adulthood at around 30, and old age. These stages represent maximum vigour in between two ends characterized by weakness. "*Some of you die earlier,*" before attaining to some of these stages. God ordains all this "*so that you may reach your appointed term*", when you die at the specified time, unable to delay it or indeed hasten it. "*And you may use your reason.*" To follow the journey travelled by the foetus and then by a baby and to reflect on what they indicate of elaborate planning requires good use of our reason.

The embryonic journey is truly fascinating. We have come to know much about it with the many recent advancements in medicine and embryology. The Qur'ānic reference to it, so accurate and precise, fourteen centuries earlier, is exceptionally interesting. Any reasonable person is bound to reflect on this fact.

These two journeys, of the embryo and the baby, directly affect our hearts, regardless of our social environment or standard of education. Every generation feels this effect in its own way and according to the information available to it. The Qur'ān addresses these facts to all

generations, and they receive the message contained in them, and then determine their response or lack of it.

This is followed by mentioning the facts of giving life and taking it away, creation and origination: "*It is He who ordains life and death. When He wills something to be, He only says to it, 'Be', and it is.*" (Verse 68) The Qur'ān repeatedly refers to life and death as they are signs that have a strong effect on man's heart. Indeed both phenomena affect everything in man's world. Both have wider scope than initially thought. There are different forms and aspects of both life and death. We need only to think of a dead, barren land, and then we see it quicken, becoming full of life. We see a tree with dry leaves and stripped branches in one season, and we see it later with life bursting through every part of it. It soon blossoms with leaves, flowers and fruit. We can look at an egg, a chic, a seed, a plant, etc. These are all aspects of the journey from death to life. There is also the opposite journey, from life to death. Both can strongly affect us as we contemplate them.

Added to these two phenomena there is the origination. It is sufficient that God's will is directed to the creation of anything through the word, 'Be,' and the subject matter of this comes into existence. Blessed be God, the best of all creators.

A Singular Argument

Against the backdrop of the emergence of human life, the cycle of life and death, the truth of initiation and origination, disputing the truth of God's revelations or the import of His signs sounds singular. Equally odd is any denial of God's messengers. Hence, a fearful warning is given in the form of a scene from the Day of Resurrection:

> *Do you not see how those who dispute God's revelations are turned away from the truth? Those who reject the Book and the messages We sent through Our messengers. They will certainly come to know when, with chains and shackles round their necks, they will be dragged into scalding water, and then burnt in the fire of hell. Then they will be asked: 'Where now are those to whom you ascribed divinity side by side with God?' They will answer: 'They have*

> *forsaken us, or rather, what we used to invoke were nothing.' Thus does God let the unbelievers go astray. 'This is because on earth you took delight in things that are untrue and you were insolent. Enter now the gates of hell, where you shall abide. Evil indeed is the abode of the arrogant.'* (Verses 69–76)

These verses first wonder at those disputing God's revelations when they see the great signs He has placed in the universe. This serves as a prelude to outlining the fate that awaits them in the life to come. "*Do you not see how those who dispute God's revelations are turned away from the truth? Those who reject the Book and the messages We sent through Our messengers.*" (Verses 69–70) They have rejected one book and one messenger, but, in fact, they reject everything all God's messengers said. Theirs is the same faith, put in its most perfect form in the final message. This means that they actually denied every single message and rejected every single messenger. Everyone who opposed the Divine faith, at any time in history including the present, did this when he or she opposed the truth advocated by the messenger addressing him personally.

"*They will certainly come to know.*" (Verse 70) This statement adds humiliation to painful punishment. "*When, with chains and shackles round their necks, they will be dragged.*" (Verse 71) They are dragged like animals and beasts to add further humiliation to their predicament. Why should they be given honourable treatment when they have discarded every single cause of honour? Their humiliation and dragging eventually leads them "*into scalding water, and then burnt in the fire of hell.*" (Verse 72) There they are tied up after the place is filled with a burning fire and scalding water.

Such is the end they face. It is then that they are further rebuked and painfully embarrassed: "*Then they will be asked: Where now are those to whom you ascribed divinity side by side with God?*" (Verses 73–74) Their reply is that of someone who is in total sorrow after he realizes that he has been badly deceived: "*They will answer: They have forsaken us, or rather, what we used to invoke were nothing.*" (Verse 74) We have lost them and we have no way of finding them. Nor can they find us. In fact we did not ascribe divinity to anyone. These were all myths and

false presumptions. After this sorrowful answer, the *sūrah* adds a general comment: "*Thus does God let the unbelievers go astray.*" (Verse 74)

A further and final reproach is then added: "*This is because on earth you took delight in things that are untrue and you were insolent. Enter now the gates of hell, where you shall abide. Evil indeed is the abode of the arrogant.*" (Verses 75–76) God save us! What, then, was all that dragging, the chains, the scalding waters and fire? It appears that these were a prelude before entering hell where they would abide. It was because of their arrogance that they were so humiliated.

Again, the *sūrah* urges the Prophet to remain patient in the face of the many levelled adversity he was encountering, represented in the arrogance shown by the unbelievers and their persistent disputing of God's revelations. He is told to have complete trust in the fulfilment of God's promise, whether God keeps him alive to see with his own eyes some aspects of what He warned the unbelievers against or He gathers him to Himself first. The whole question is determined by God. God's messenger's task is to deliver his message. Ultimately, all will return to God:

> *Hence, remain patient in adversity, for God's promise always comes true. Whether We show you something of what We hold in store for them or We cause you to die before that, it is to Us that they shall all return.* (Verse 77)

There is something that deserves careful attention here. The Prophet Muḥammad, God's messenger, who faced a determined onslaught of rejection, persecution and arrogant hostility is being told in short: 'Fulfil your duty and do not be concerned with anything else. The outcome is none of your concern.' He was not even to entertain wishes that God might act in fulfilment of some aspects of the punishment promised to the arrogant unbelievers. He is simply required to fulfil his responsibility. The whole dispute is not his; it is God's and He determines how He will settle it.

This is a very high standard of discipline which God requires from the advocates of His message, starting with His noble messenger, Muḥammad (peace be upon him). What is required of them is very

hard indeed. It requires them to keep their strong feelings and wishes in check. Is it for this reason that the command to remain patient is given at this point in the *sūrah*? In this sense, it is not a repeat of the earlier order to be patient. Rather, it points to a different type of patience, which can be harder than handling arrogance and physical harm with patience.

Here we see that ordinary human beings, advocating God's message, are required to purge themselves of the desire to see how God punishes His and their enemies who continue to fight against them. This is extremely difficult. Yet it is part of the cultivation of the ideals of those who serve God's cause. They are to shed everything that they desire for themselves, even though this may be no more than to see the enemies of their faith defeated and punished.

When the advocates of God's faith attain this level, they equip themselves with what saves them from drowning in the ocean of desire. Desires may seem pure and justified to start with, but Satan tries hard to manipulate them for his own ends.

4

When it is Too Late to Believe

We sent other messengers before your time; some We have given you an account of, while others We have not. No messenger could bring a sign except by God's leave. When God's will becomes manifest, judgement will be passed between them in all justice, and lost will be, then and there, all who have followed falsehood. (78)

وَلَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا رُسُلًا مِّن قَبْلِكَ مِنْهُم مَّن قَصَصْنَا عَلَيْكَ وَمِنْهُم مَّن لَّمْ نَقْصُصْ عَلَيْكَ ۗ وَمَا كَانَ لِرَسُولٍ أَن يَأْتِيَ بِآيَةٍ إِلَّا بِإِذْنِ اللَّهِ ۚ فَإِذَا جَاءَ أَمْرُ اللَّهِ قُضِيَ بِالْحَقِّ وَخَسِرَ هُنَالِكَ الْمُبْطِلُونَ ﴿٧٨﴾

It is God who provides livestock for you, some for riding and some for your food. (79)

اللَّهُ الَّذِي جَعَلَ لَكُمُ الْأَنْعَامَ لِتَرْكَبُوا مِنْهَا وَمِنْهَا تَأْكُلُونَ ﴿٧٩﴾

You have other benefits in them too. You can reach on them any destination you wish. On them, as on ships, you are carried. (80)

وَلَكُمْ فِيهَا مَنَافِعُ وَلِتَبْلُغُوا عَلَيْهَا حَاجَةً فِي صُدُورِكُمْ وَعَلَيْهَا وَعَلَى الْفُلْكِ تُحْمَلُونَ ﴿٨٠﴾

And He shows you His signs: which of God's signs can you still deny? (81)

وَيُرِيكُمْ آيَاتِهِ فَأَيَّ آيَاتِ اللَّهِ تُنكِرُونَ ﴿٨١﴾

Have they not travelled through the land and seen what was the end of those who lived before them? They were more numerous than them, and greater in power and in the impact they left on earth. Yet what they achieved was of no avail to them. (82)

أَفَلَمْ يَسِيرُوا فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ فَيَنظُرُوا كَيْفَ كَانَ عَٰقِبَةُ ٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِهِمْ ۚ كَانُوٓا أَكْثَرَ مِنْهُمْ وَأَشَدَّ قُوَّةً وَءَاثَارًا فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ فَمَآ أَغْنَىٰ عَنْهُم مَّا كَانُوا يَكْسِبُونَ ﴿٨٢﴾

When God's messengers came to them with all evidence of the truth, they revelled in what knowledge they had; and so they were overwhelmed by the very thing which they mocked. (83)

فَلَمَّا جَآءَتْهُمْ رُسُلُهُم بِٱلْبَيِّنَٰتِ فَرِحُوا بِمَا عِندَهُم مِّنَ ٱلْعِلْمِ وَحَاقَ بِهِم مَّا كَانُوا بِهِۦ يَسْتَهْزِءُونَ ﴿٨٣﴾

And then when they saw Our might, they said: 'We believe in God alone, and we renounce those we used to associate as partners with Him.' (84)

فَلَمَّا رَأَوْا بَأْسَنَا قَالُوٓا ءَامَنَّا بِٱللَّهِ وَحْدَهُۥ وَكَفَرْنَا بِمَا كُنَّا بِهِۦ مُشْرِكِينَ ﴿٨٤﴾

But accepting the faith after they had seen Our might was not going to benefit them at all. This has always been God's way of dealing with His creatures. There and then the unbelievers will be lost. (85)

فَلَمْ يَكُ يَنفَعُهُمْ إِيمَٰنُهُمْ لَمَّا رَأَوْا بَأْسَنَا ۖ سُنَّتَ ٱللَّهِ ٱلَّتِى قَدْ خَلَتْ فِى عِبَادِهِۦ ۖ وَخَسِرَ هُنَالِكَ ٱلْكَٰفِرُونَ ﴿٨٥﴾

Overview

This final part of the *sūrah* elaborates on the comments given at the end of the previous part. It again directs the Prophet and the believers to remain patient in adversity, until God wills to bring about what He has promised the believers and what He has warned the unbelievers against. This may take place during the Prophet's lifetime or may be

delayed until a later time. The question here is that of faith, the believers and the rejecters who dispute its truth. The arbiter in all this is God. It is He who determines the course of His message as He pleases.

In this part the *sūrah* outlines some additional aspects of this point. The Divine message has a long history. It did not start with the Prophet Muḥammad and the Islamic message embodied in the Qur'ān. Before him there were many messengers, some of whom God mentioned to the Prophet and some He did not. They all faced rejection and arrogance. They were all required to demonstrate miracles. Everyone of them dearly wished that God would give him a miracle which would force the rejecters to submit to the truth. However, showing such a sign or a miracle is a matter that God determines at His own time. The message is His and He conducts its affairs.

Nevertheless, there are numerous signs in the universe, which can be seen by all at all times. Of these, the *sūrah* mentions here cattle and ships, and refers in general to other signs which no one can deny.

The *sūrah* concludes with a strong reminder of the destruction of earlier communities all of whom displayed similar arrogance. Their power and civilization were of little use to them when God's law was applied: "*But accepting the faith after they had seen Our might was not going to benefit them at all. This has always been God's way of dealing with His creatures. There and then the unbelievers will be lost.*" (Verse 85) On this powerful note the *sūrah* concludes. It is a *sūrah* that focuses its attention on the battle between truth and falsehood, faith and unfaith, tyranny and justice.

Past Messengers

> *We sent other messengers before your time; some We have given you an account of, while others We have not. No messenger could bring a sign except by God's leave. When God's will becomes manifest, judgement will be passed between them in all justice, and lost will be, then and there, all who have followed falsehood.* (Verse 78)

This whole question of the message has had many precedents, some of which are told by God to His messenger in this book, the Qur'ān. Others, He chose not to tell him about. The accounts that have been

given clearly show the long, clearly marked way that advocacy of the Divine message should take. They also outline the rules that cannot be altered, since God has set them into operation. Furthermore, these accounts of past messengers make clear the nature of the message, the role of the messengers and the limits they have to observe.

The present verse strongly emphasizes a fact that needs to be fully understood: "*No messenger could bring a sign except by God's leave.*" (Verse 78) Every believer, even though he may be a messenger of God, would love to see the Divine message victorious. They dearly wish that those who stubbornly reject it will soon succumb to its truth. Therefore, they would love to see a miracle that would break the stubbornness of hardened unbelievers. However, God wants His chosen servants to remain absolutely patient in the face of all adversity. He, therefore, makes it clear to them that they have no say in the matter; their task is completed when they have delivered their message. Miracles occur at the time of His choice. Thus, they should be reassured, satisfied with whatever is accomplished through them, leaving the final outcome to God, who determines it as He pleases.

God also wants people to understand the nature of Godhead and the nature of prophethood. He wants them to realize that God's messengers are mortals like them: He has chosen them and assigned them their missions. Not only can they not exceed that mission, they would not try to do so. Moreover, people should know that miracles are delayed out of God's mercy. It is God's will that should people continue to reject His faith after they have been given a miracle, He will destroy them soon after that. Thus, they are given time and a period of grace: "*When God's will becomes manifest, judgement will be passed between them in all justice, and lost will be, then and there, all who have followed falsehood.*" (Verse 78) There will be no time left for any further action, nor for repentance or mending of ways.

Signs Everywhere

Those who demand miracles are directed to reflect on God's signs that are present everywhere in the world around them. Because of the long familiarity of these, they are often forgotten. Reflection on them, however, is sufficient to give them all the evidence they want. They

testify to the fact that God is the Creator of everything in the universe. No one can claim that these have been created by anyone other than God; nor can there be any claim that they existed without being created by God who has planned everything:

> *It is God who provides livestock for you, some for riding and some for your food. You have other benefits in them too. You can reach on them any destination you wish. On them, as on ships, you are carried. And He shows you His signs: which of God's signs can you still deny?* (Verses 79–81)

The creation of livestock is a miracle in the first place, just like the creation of man. To shape and fashion them and to give them life are all miracles which human beings do not even claim. Another miracle is making such livestock subservient to man, when some of them are larger and stronger than man. Yet, "*It is God who provides livestock for you, some for riding and some for your food.*" (Verse 79) To say that such livestock merely exist and we need not concern ourselves with how or why they do is unacceptable. To claim that they are not a clear miracle in relation to man and his ability, or that they do not point to the Creator who originated them and gave them their characteristics, as He did with man, is to make arbitrary claims that run against logic and reason.

The *sūrah* reminds them of the favours God has granted them through these creatures: "*some for riding and some for your food. You have other benefits in them too. You can reach on them any destination you wish. On them, as on ships, you are carried.*" (Verses 79–80) The things that they used to desire and accomplish through travelling on such mounts were great at the time; this before the invention of modern means of travel and transport. There are still certain things that continue to be done by using such livestock. Even today, certain mountainous areas can only be reached by using animals, despite the fact that cars, trains, planes and other vehicles are available to us. Access to them is through narrow passages that can only be traversed by animals.

"*On them, as on ships, you are carried.*" (Verse 80) This is also a sign from God; indeed, a great blessing from Him. The fact that ships sail on the sea is based on a number of natural laws and balances that are of the essence of the universe's design. They involve the earth, sky, dry

land, sea and river, as well as the nature of the elements and components of the universe. These are essential whether a boat uses sail, steam, combustion engine, nuclear power, or some other power God has placed on our planet and the use of which He has facilitated for man. Hence, ships are mentioned here as an aspect of God's signs on the one hand and the blessings He bestows on man on the other.

God's signs throughout the universe are countless. They cannot be denied by any serious minded person: "*And He shows you His signs: which of God's signs can you still deny?*" (Verse 81) Yes, indeed! Some people do deny and dispute God's revelations and signs, using false arguments to try to undermine the truth. Such people, however, are motivated only by ulterior motives, arrogance, twisted concepts or some purpose other than establishing the truth. A tyrant like Pharaoh, who feared for his throne because he knew that the truth of God's oneness would disprove the legends on which his kingship was based, disputed God's signs and His message. Some people believe in certain creeds that are incompatible with the principle of God's oneness such as communism. Communists wanted people to confine themselves to the earth, concentrating all their cares on their bellies and sexual desires. They wanted people to worship nothing other than the creed or the leader. Others suffered under the yoke of the clergy, as happened during the Middle Ages in Europe when the Church held excessive powers, and people wanted to get rid of such tyranny. Therefore, they rejected God in whose name the Church exercized its tyranny.

There are other motives that make people dispute the truth of faith. However, human nature finds such disputes repugnant and acknowledges the truth testified by everything in the universe.

Lessons of History

The *sūrah* concludes on a very powerful note:

> *Have they not travelled through the land and seen what was the end of those who lived before them? They were more numerous than them, and greater in power and in the impact they left on earth. Yet what they achieved was of no avail to them. When God's messengers came to them with all evidence of the truth, they revelled*

in what knowledge they had; and so they were overwhelmed by the very thing which they mocked. And then when they saw Our might, they said: 'We believe in God alone, and we renounce those we used to associate as partners with Him. But accepting the faith after they had seen Our might was not going to benefit them at all. This has always been God's way of dealing with His creatures. There and then the unbelievers will be lost. (Verses 82–85)

Many communities were destroyed during human history. What happened to some of these communities can be seen in their ruins; others are recorded in history, written or transmitted by word of mouth. The Qur'ān often directs our attention to these histories because they are indicative of human life and its course of history. They also have a powerful effect on our minds and hearts. The Qur'ān addresses human nature by what God, who revealed the Qur'ān, knows of human nature: what influences it and what opens its receptors. Some of these receptors need only a light tap, while others require strong hammering because of the thick veils that have covered them over time.

At this point the *sūrah* questions them, encouraging them to travel across the land with open eyes, alert feelings and an objective approach. They should look at what took place on earth before their time, and consider whether they too might be exposed to the same: "*Have they not travelled through the land and seen what was the end of those who lived before them?*" (Verse 82) Before specifying what end they met, the *sūrah* describes the conditions of those past communities so that the addressees can consider how it could affect them and also enable them to draw the right lessons: "*They were more numerous than them, and greater in power and in the impact they left on earth.*" (Verse 82) Thus, they enjoyed power and civilization. Some of these belonged to generations that preceded the Arabs, the history of some is given to the Prophet, while others were known to the Arabs who passed by their ruins: "*Yet what they achieved was of no avail to them.*" (Verse 82)

Neither material power nor numerical strength was of any avail to them. Indeed their advancement was the cause of their tragedy: "*When God's messengers came to them with all evidence of the truth, they revelled in what knowledge they had.*" (Verse 83) Without faith, knowledge becomes a test that may cause blindness and excess. Such superficial

knowledge can lead to conceit and arrogance. Given such knowledge, a person may think that he can control immense powers and immeasurable resources and this leads him to transgress beyond his limits. He tends to forget the great many things he does not know. These are present in the universe, but he has no power over them. Indeed, he is not fully aware of them. He only knows their ends that are close to him. Yet he boasts falsely, emphasizing his knowledge and overlooking his ignorance. If he would only compare what he knows to what he does not, and what he is able to do to with what he cannot even begin to understand, he would certainly moderate his excitement about his knowledge.

Those people, however, revelled in what little knowledge they had and ridiculed whoever reminded them of what is beyond their knowledge: "*And so they were overwhelmed by the very thing which they mocked.*" (Verse 83) Therefore, when they see God's might, they begin to realize the truth of their arrogance and acknowledge what they used to deny. They declare their belief in God's oneness and disown those deities which they alleged to be God's partners. All this, however, comes when it is too late: "*And then when they saw Our might, they said: 'We believe in God alone, and we renounce those we used to associate as partners with Him. But accepting the faith after they had seen Our might was not going to benefit them at all.*" (Verses 84–85) It is a rule God has established that repentance after demonstrating God's might is not acceptable, because it is motivated by fear, not by faith. "*This has always been God's way of dealing with His creatures.*" (Verse 85) God's way remains operative at all times. It never changes, deviates or fails: "*There and then the unbelievers will be lost.*" (Verse 85)

This is a very powerful conclusion to the *sūrah*, with God's might overwhelming the rejecters when they are raising their voices with appeals motivated by fear. Thus, the end fits well with overall ambience and main subject matter of the *sūrah*.

The *sūrah* tackles those issues of faith that feature prominently in Makkan revelations, such as God's oneness, resurrection and revelation. These, however, are not the main themes of the *sūrah*. Its main theme is the battle between truth and falsehood, faith and unfaith, tyranny and justice. Indeed, the development of this battle gives the *sūrah* its distinctive features.

SŪRAH 41

Fuṣṣilat

(Clearly Expounded)

Prologue

The question of faith and its essential principles is the major theme of this *sūrah*: God's oneness, the life to come, the revealed message as well as advocacy of the message and the manners an advocate of the Divine message should adopt. All that the *sūrah* includes serves to explain these fundamental principles and provide evidence supporting them. The *sūrah* presents some of God's signs that are available in man and in the expanse of the universe, warns against denying such signs, and reminds people of the fates suffered by earlier generations that denied the truth and shows what happens to such unbelievers on the Day of Resurrection. It explains that only such unbelievers among men and *jinn* refuse to acknowledge these truths or to submit themselves to God. By contrast, the heavens, the earth, the sun, the moon and the angels submit themselves and humbly prostrate themselves before God.

Concerning the truth of God's oneness, we read at the beginning of the *sūrah* verses such as: "*Say: I am but a human being like yourselves. It has been revealed to me that your God is the One and only God. Therefore, take the straight path to Him and seek His forgiveness. Woe to those who associate partners with Him.*" (Verse 6) "*Say: Do you indeed disbelieve in Him who has created the earth in two Days? And do you*

claim others to be His equals? It is He who is the Lord of all the worlds." (Verse 9) Speaking of the people of 'Ād and Thamūd, the *sūrah* tells us that the messengers sent to them explained the same truth to them: "*Worship none but God.*" (Verse 14) In the middle of the *sūrah* we have the commandment: "*Do not prostrate yourselves before the sun or the moon; but prostrate yourselves before God.*" (Verse 37) Speaking about the same basic truth, the *sūrah* says towards its end: "*on the Day when He shall call out to them, 'Where now are those alleged partners of Mine?' They will say, 'We confess to You that none of us can vouch for them.'*" (Verse 47)

On the question of the life to come the *sūrah* issues a stern warning to those who do not believe in it: "*Woe to those who associate partners with Him, and who do not pay the obligatory charity, and who refuse to believe in the life to come.*" (Verses 6–7) It concludes with this verse: "*They are certainly in doubt as to whether they will meet their Lord. Most certainly, He encompasses everything.*" (Verse 54) The truth of the Day of Judgement is also mentioned in the images the *sūrah* portrays of what happens on that day, which confirms, with even greater certainty, the fact of its undoubted coming.

As for the question of revelation, there is much about it in this *sūrah*, almost to the point of revelation being its main theme. In fact, the *sūrah* opens with a detailed discussion of this issue: "Ḥā. Mīm. *A revelation from the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful: a book, the verses of which have been clearly spelled out as a discourse in Arabic for people of knowledge. It gives good news as well as a warning. Yet, most of them turn away, so that they do not hear. They say: 'Our hearts are veiled from whatever you call us to, and in our ears is deafness, and there is a barrier between us and you. So do you what you will, and so shall we.' Say: 'I am but a human being like yourselves. It has been revealed to me that...*" (Verses 1–6) The middle part of the *sūrah* mentions how the idolaters received the Qur'ān: "*The unbelievers say: Do not listen to this Qur'ān, but drown it in frivolous talk, so that you may gain the upper hand.*" (Verse 26) Then we are given a more detailed account of how the Qur'ān was received and a response to what the unbelievers used to assert about it: "*Those who reject this reminder [i.e. the Qur'ān] when it comes to them ... It is indeed a*

sublime book; no falsehood can ever touch it openly or in a stealthy manner. It is bestowed from on high by One who is wise, worthy of praise. Nothing is being said to you that was not said to the messengers sent before your time. Your Lord is the Lord of forgiveness, but He also inflicts painful punishment. Had We willed to make this revelation a discourse in a non-Arabic tongue, they would have said: 'If only its verses were clearly spelled out! Why [a message in] a non-Arabic tongue and an Arab [messenger]?' Say: 'This is guidance and healing for all those who believe; but as for the unbelievers: there is deafness in their ears, and they are blind to it.' They are, as it were, being called to from too far away." (Verses 41–44)

In its discussion of the method of advocating the Divine message and the manners adopted by such advocates, the *sūrah* says: "*Who speaks better than he who calls people to God, does what is right, and says, 'I am one of those who have surrendered themselves to God'? Good and evil cannot be equal. Repel evil with what is better, and he who is your enemy will become as close to you as a true friend. Yet none will attain this except those who are patient in adversity; none will attain it except those endowed with truly great fortune. If a prompting from Satan should stir you up, seek refuge with God. He alone is All-Hearing, All-Knowing.*" (Verses 33–36)

These issues are presented against a backdrop of images that have a profound effect on the listener. The *sūrah* draws these images from a universe replete with signs and from the human soul with its remarkable constitution. It also shows images of the fates suffered by earlier communities of unbelievers and intense scenes from the Day of Resurrection.

One of these scenes of the universe is a very detailed image of the original creation of the heavens and the earth: "*Say: 'Do you indeed disbelieve in Him who has created the earth in two Days? And do you claim others to be His equals? It is He who is the Lord of all the worlds. He it is who placed on the earth firm mountains towering above it, and bestowed His blessings on it, and measured out its varied provisions in four days, ensuring equity for all who seek [such provisions]. Then, He applied His design to the sky, which was but smoke; and said to it and to the earth: 'Come, both of you, willingly or unwillingly.' They both said:*

'We do come willingly.' So He decreed that they become seven heavens in two days, and assigned to each heaven its task. We adorned the sky nearest to the earth with lights, and made them secure. Such is the design of the Almighty, the All-Knowing." (Verses 9–12)

We also have images of the creation of the night and day, the sun and moon, the worship offered by the angels and the earth as it humbly worships God and how it springs into life: "*Among His signs are the night and the day, and the sun and the moon. Do not prostrate yourselves before the sun or the moon; but prostrate yourselves before God, who has created them, if it is Him you really worship. If the unbelievers are too arrogant, those who are with your Lord glorify Him night and day and never grow weary of that. Another of His signs is this: you see the earth lying desolate, but when We send down rain water upon it, it stirs and swells [with life]. He who brings it to life will surely give life to the dead. He has power over all things.*" (Verses 37–39)

The human soul is laid bare before our eyes such that we see it as it really is: "*Man never tires of asking for good [things], but if evil fortune touches him, he abandons all hope, sinking into despair. Yet whenever We let him taste some of Our grace after hardship has befallen him, he is sure to say, 'This is but my due!' and, 'I do not think that the Last Hour will ever come; but even if I were to be taken back to my Lord, the best reward awaits me with Him.' We shall most certainly give the unbelievers a full account of what they did, and We shall most certainly give them a taste of severe suffering. When we bestow Our blessings on man, he tends to turn aside and stay aloof; but as soon as evil touches him, he turns to prolonged prayer.*" (Verses 49–51)

Regarding the fates of earlier communities, the *sūrah* presents what happened to the 'Ād and Thamūd: "*As for the 'Ād, they behaved arrogantly through the land, against all right, and said: 'Who is mightier than us?' Did they not realize that God, who created them, was mightier than them? They continued to reject Our revelations. Therefore, We let loose upon them a howling gale raging through several days of misfortune, so as to give them, in the life of this world, a foretaste of humiliating suffering. Yet the suffering in the life to come will be even more humiliating, and they will have none to help them. As for the Thamūd, We offered them guidance, but they chose blindness in preference to guidance.*

Therefore, the thunderbolt of humiliating suffering struck them in consequence of what they had wrought. And We saved those who believed and were God-fearing." (Verses 15–18)

Several scenes are presented from the Day of Resurrection. One intensely effective and detailed image shows the unbelievers speaking to their own senses: "*On the day when God's enemies will be gathered together before the fire, they will be driven onwards until, when they reach it, their ears, their eyes and their very skins will bear witness against them, speaking of what they used to do [on earth]. They will ask their skins: 'Why did you bear witness against us?' To which they will reply: 'God, who gave speech to all things, has made us speak. It is He who created you in the first instance, and to Him you now return.'"* (Verses 19–21) Another image shows, in full clarity, the anger felt by those who were deceived in this life against those who deluded them: "*The unbelievers say: 'Our Lord! Show us those* jinn *and men who have led us astray. We shall trample them under our feet so that they shall be among the lowest of the low.'"* (Verse 29)

This great variety of imagery, forming the background against which the main issues of faith are presented, constitutes the overall ambience of the *sūrah*. Right from the very outset until the end we find ourselves before the most striking and powerful of influences.

The *sūrah* may be divided into two parts, each consisting of closely interlinked sections. The first part begins with verses speaking about the Qur'ān, its nature and revelation, as well as the unbelievers' attitude to it. This is followed by an account of the creation of the heavens and the earth and the stories of the 'Ād and Thamūd. Then, comes a scene of the unbelievers on the Day of Judgement and how they face the testimony of their own senses. It then speaks about those unbelievers in this present life and how they have gone so astray. It states that they had cronies who made evil things seem fair to them. As a result they used to urge one another not to listen to the Qur'ān, but instead to try to silence it so that they might win. This is followed by an image depicting how angry they feel on the Day of Judgement with those cronies who deluded them. A contrasting image shows us those who believed in God's oneness and followed the straight path. These receive angels who reassure them and give them news of their great prospects.

The angels tell them that they will be their friends and guardians in both this present life and in the life to come. This part concludes with a reference to the message and those who advocate it.

The second part begins by speaking about the signs God placed in the universe: the night, day, sun, moon, angels in devotion, the desolate earth and how it quickens and becomes full of life. This is followed by a reference to those who dispute God's signs and His revelations, leading to a reference to God's book and its main qualities before a brief reference is made to Moses' book and the disputes that arose among his people concerning it. The *sūrah* leaves judgement concerning all these disputes to God, at the time appointed by Him. At this point the *sūrah* adds a reference to the Last Hour and that knowledge of it belongs to God alone. He also knows the fruit that will eventually develop from flowers and what offspring will be born to pregnant females. It also shows an image of the unbelievers and how they ask about those deities whom they alleged to be God's partners. Following this the *sūrah* presents the human soul as it is, shedding all its coverings. Although man is keen to protect himself he takes no precautions to spare himself the results of denying God and His messages.

The *sūrah* concludes with a promise by God that He will make His signs within man and in the universe available to people so that they have a chance to review their attitude and be assured of their faith: "*We shall show them Our signs in the wide horizons [of the universe] and within themselves, so that it will become clear to them that this [revelation] is indeed the truth. Is it not enough that your Lord is witness to everything? They are certainly in doubt as to whether they will meet their Lord. Most certainly, He encompasses everything.*" (Verses 53–54)

I

Testimony of One's Own Senses

Fuṣṣilat (Clearly Expounded)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

Ḥā. Mīm. (1)

A revelation from the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful: (2)

a book, the verses of which have been clearly spelled out as a discourse in Arabic for people of knowledge. (3)

It gives good news as well as a warning. Yet, most of them turn away, so that they do not hear. (4)

They say: 'Our hearts are veiled from whatever you call us to, and in our ears is deafness, and there is a barrier between us and you. So do you what you will, and so shall we.' (5)

Say: 'I am but a human being like yourselves. It has been revealed to me that your God is the One and only God. Therefore, take the straight path to Him and seek His forgiveness.' Woe to those who associate partners with Him, (6)

قُلْ إِنَّمَا أَنَا بَشَرٌ مِّثْلُكُمْ يُوحَىٰ إِلَيَّ أَنَّمَا
إِلَٰهُكُمْ إِلَٰهٌ وَاحِدٌ فَاسْتَقِيمُوا إِلَيْهِ
وَاسْتَغْفِرُوهُ وَوَيْلٌ لِّلْمُشْرِكِينَ ﴿٦﴾

and who do not pay the obligatory charity, and who refuse to believe in the life to come. (7)

الَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْتُونَ الزَّكَوٰةَ وَهُم
بِالْآخِرَةِ هُمْ كَٰفِرُونَ ﴿٧﴾

Those who believe and do good deeds shall have an unfailing reward. (8)

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّٰلِحَٰتِ
لَهُمْ أَجْرٌ غَيْرُ مَمْنُونٍ ﴿٨﴾

Say: 'Do you indeed disbelieve in Him who has created the earth in two days? And do you claim others to be His equals? It is He who is the Lord of all the worlds. (9)

قُلْ أَئِنَّكُمْ لَتَكْفُرُونَ بِالَّذِي خَلَقَ
الْأَرْضَ فِي يَوْمَيْنِ وَتَجْعَلُونَ لَهُ
أَندَادًا ذَٰلِكَ رَبُّ الْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٩﴾

He it is who placed on the earth firm mountains towering above it, and bestowed His blessings on it, and measured out its varied provisions in four days, ensuring equity for all who seek [such provisions]. (10)

وَجَعَلَ فِيهَا رَوَٰسِيَ مِن فَوْقِهَا وَبَٰرَكَ فِيهَا
وَقَدَّرَ فِيهَا أَقْوَٰتَهَا فِي أَرْبَعَةِ أَيَّامٍ سَوَآءً
لِّلسَّآئِلِينَ ﴿١٠﴾

ثُمَّ ٱسْتَوَىٰٓ إِلَى ٱلسَّمَآءِ وَهِىَ دُخَانٌ فَقَالَ لَهَا وَلِلْأَرْضِ ٱئْتِيَا طَوْعًا أَوْ كَرْهًا قَالَتَآ أَتَيْنَا طَآئِعِينَ ﴿١١﴾

Then, He applied His design to the sky, which was but smoke; and said to it and to the earth: 'Come, both of you, willingly or unwillingly.' They both said: 'We do come willingly.' (11)

فَقَضَىٰهُنَّ سَبْعَ سَمَٰوَاتٍ فِى يَوْمَيْنِ وَأَوْحَىٰ فِى كُلِّ سَمَآءٍ أَمْرَهَا وَزَيَّنَّا ٱلسَّمَآءَ ٱلدُّنْيَا بِمَصَٰبِيحَ وَحِفْظًا ذَٰلِكَ تَقْدِيرُ ٱلْعَزِيزِ ٱلْعَلِيمِ ﴿١٢﴾

So He decreed that they become seven heavens in two days, and assigned to each heaven its task. We adorned the sky nearest to the earth with lights, and made them secure. Such is the design of the Almighty, the All-Knowing. (12)

فَإِنْ أَعْرَضُوا۟ فَقُلْ أَنذَرْتُكُمْ صَٰعِقَةً مِّثْلَ صَٰعِقَةِ عَادٍ وَثَمُودَ ﴿١٣﴾

If they turn away, say: 'I warn you of a thunderbolt like the thunderbolt that struck the 'Ād and Thamūd.' (13)

إِذْ جَآءَتْهُمُ ٱلرُّسُلُ مِنۢ بَيْنِ أَيْدِيهِمْ وَمِنْ خَلْفِهِمْ أَلَّا تَعْبُدُوٓا۟ إِلَّا ٱللَّهَ قَالُوا۟ لَوْ شَآءَ رَبُّنَا لَأَنزَلَ مَلَٰٓئِكَةً فَإِنَّا بِمَآ أُرْسِلْتُم بِهِۦ كَٰفِرُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

There came to them, from all directions, messengers saying: 'Worship none but God.' They answered: 'If our Lord had wished, He would have sent down angels. We will never believe in your message.' (14)

فَأَمَّا عَادٌ فَٱسْتَكْبَرُوا۟ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ بِغَيْرِ ٱلْحَقِّ وَقَالُوا۟ مَنْ أَشَدُّ مِنَّا قُوَّةً أَوَلَمْ يَرَوْا۟ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ ٱلَّذِى خَلَقَهُمْ هُوَ أَشَدُّ مِنْهُمْ قُوَّةً وَكَانُوا۟ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَا يَجْحَدُونَ ﴿١٥﴾

As for the 'Ād, they behaved arrogantly through the land, against all right, and said: 'Who is mightier than us?' Did they not realize that God, who created them, was mightier than them? They continued to reject Our revelations. (15)

Therefore, We let loose upon them a howling gale raging through several days of misfortune, so as to give them, in the life of this world, a foretaste of humiliating suffering. Yet the suffering in the life to come will be even more humiliating, and they will have none to help them. (16)

فَأَرْسَلْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ رِيحًا صَرْصَرًا فِيٓ أَيَّامٍ
نَّحِسَاتٍ لِّنُذِيقَهُمْ عَذَابَ ٱلْخِزْيِ فِي
ٱلْحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنْيَا وَلَعَذَابُ ٱلْأٓخِرَةِ أَخْزَىٰ
وَهُمْ لَا يُنصَرُونَ ﴿١٦﴾

As for the Thamūd, We offered them guidance, but they chose blindness in preference to guidance. Therefore, the thunderbolt of humiliating suffering struck them in consequence of what they had wrought. (17)

وَأَمَّا ثَمُودُ فَهَدَيْنَٰهُمْ فَٱسْتَحَبُّوا۟ ٱلْعَمَىٰ
عَلَى ٱلْهُدَىٰ فَأَخَذَتْهُمْ صَٰعِقَةُ ٱلْعَذَابِ
ٱلْهُونِ بِمَا كَانُوا۟ يَكْسِبُونَ ﴿١٧﴾

And We saved those who believed and were God-fearing. (18)

وَنَجَّيْنَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَكَانُوا۟ يَتَّقُونَ ﴿١٨﴾

On the day when God's enemies will be gathered together before the fire, they will be driven onwards (19)

وَيَوْمَ يُحْشَرُ أَعْدَآءُ ٱللَّهِ إِلَى ٱلنَّارِ
فَهُمْ يُوزَعُونَ ﴿١٩﴾

until, when they reach it, their ears, their eyes and their very skins will bear witness against them, speaking of what they used to do [on earth]. (20)

حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا مَا جَآءُوهَا شَهِدَ عَلَيْهِمْ
سَمْعُهُمْ وَأَبْصَٰرُهُمْ وَجُلُودُهُم
بِمَا كَانُوا۟ يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٢٠﴾

وَقَالُوا لِجُلُودِهِمْ لِمَ شَهِدتُّمْ عَلَيْنَا قَالُوا أَنطَقَنَا اللَّهُ الَّذِي أَنطَقَ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ وَهُوَ خَلَقَكُمْ أَوَّلَ مَرَّةٍ وَإِلَيْهِ تُرْجَعُونَ ٢١

They will ask their skins: 'Why did you bear witness against us?' To which they will reply: 'God, who gave speech to all things, has made us speak. It is He who created you in the first instance, and to Him you now return. (21)

وَمَا كُنتُمْ تَسْتَتِرُونَ أَن يَشْهَدَ عَلَيْكُمْ سَمْعُكُمْ وَلَا أَبْصَارُكُمْ وَلَا جُلُودُكُمْ وَلَٰكِن ظَنَنتُمْ أَنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَعْلَمُ كَثِيرًا مِّمَّا تَعْمَلُونَ ٢٢

'You did not try to hide yourselves so that your ears, eyes and skins could not be made to testify against you. Yet you thought that God did not know much of what you were doing. (22)

وَذَٰلِكُمْ ظَنُّكُمُ الَّذِي ظَنَنتُم بِرَبِّكُمْ أَرْدَاكُمْ فَأَصْبَحْتُم مِّنَ الْخَاسِرِينَ ٢٣

'And it is this thought of yours which you entertained about your Lord that brought you to perdition, so that you are now among the lost.' (23)

فَإِن يَصْبِرُوا فَالنَّارُ مَثْوًى لَّهُمْ وَإِن يَسْتَعْتِبُوا فَمَا هُم مِّنَ الْمُعْتَبِينَ ٢٤

If they resign themselves to patience, the fire will be their home; and if they pray to be allowed to make amends, they will not be allowed to do so. (24)

وَقَيَّضْنَا لَهُمْ قُرَنَاءَ فَزَيَّنُوا لَهُم مَّا بَيْنَ أَيْدِيهِمْ وَمَا خَلْفَهُمْ وَحَقَّ عَلَيْهِمُ الْقَوْلُ فِي أُمَمٍ قَدْ خَلَتْ مِن قَبْلِهِم مِّنَ الْجِنِّ وَالْإِنسِ إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا خَاسِرِينَ ٢٥

We have assigned to the unbelievers companions who made their past and present seem goodly to them, but the sentence has fallen due upon them together with bygone generations of *jinn* and humans. They will indeed be lost. (25)

The unbelievers say: 'Do not listen to this Qur'ān, but drown it in frivolous talk, so that you may gain the upper hand.' (26)

وَقَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ لَا تَسْمَعُوا۟ لِهَٰذَا ٱلْقُرْءَانِ
وَٱلْغَوْا۟ فِيهِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَغْلِبُونَ ﴿٢٦﴾

We shall most certainly give the unbelievers a taste of severe suffering; and We shall most certainly requite them according to the worst of their deeds. (27)

فَلَنُذِيقَنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ عَذَابًا
شَدِيدًا وَلَنَجْزِيَنَّهُمْ أَسْوَأَ ٱلَّذِى
كَانُوا۟ يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٢٧﴾

Such is the requital of the enemies of God: the fire will be their lasting home: a fit requital for their having knowingly rejected Our revelations. (28)

ذَٰلِكَ جَزَآءُ أَعْدَآءِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلنَّارُ ۖ لَهُمْ فِيهَا دَارُ
ٱلْخُلْدِ ۖ جَزَآءًۢ بِمَا كَانُوا۟ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَا يَجْحَدُونَ ﴿٢٨﴾

The unbelievers say: 'Our Lord! Show us those *jinn* and men who have led us astray. We shall trample them under our feet so that they shall be among the lowest of the low.' (29)

وَقَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ رَبَّنَآ أَرِنَا
ٱلَّذَيْنِ أَضَلَّانَا مِنَ ٱلْجِنِّ وَٱلْإِنسِ
نَجْعَلْهُمَا تَحْتَ أَقْدَامِنَا لِيَكُونَا
مِنَ ٱلْأَسْفَلِينَ ﴿٢٩﴾

As for those who say: 'Our Lord is God,' and then steadfastly pursue the right way, the angels will descend on them, saying: 'Have no fear, and do not grieve, but rejoice in the good news of Paradise which you have been promised. (30)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ قَالُوا۟ رَبُّنَا ٱللَّهُ ثُمَّ
ٱسْتَقَٰمُوا۟ تَتَنَزَّلُ عَلَيْهِمُ
ٱلْمَلَٰٓئِكَةُ أَلَّا تَخَافُوا۟
وَلَا تَحْزَنُوا۟ وَأَبْشِرُوا۟ بِٱلْجَنَّةِ
ٱلَّتِى كُنتُمْ تُوعَدُونَ ﴿٣٠﴾

'We are your guardians in the life of this world and in the life to come. There you shall have all that your souls desire, and all that you ask for, (31)

نَحْنُ أَوْلِيَاؤُكُمْ فِي الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا
وَفِي الْآخِرَةِ ۖ وَلَكُمْ فِيهَا
مَا تَشْتَهِي أَنفُسُكُمْ وَلَكُمْ
فِيهَا مَا تَدَّعُونَ ﴿٣١﴾

as a ready welcome from Him who is much-forgiving, ever-merciful.' (32)

نُزُلًا مِّنْ غَفُورٍ رَّحِيمٍ ﴿٣٢﴾

Who speaks better than he who calls people to God, does what is right, and says, 'I am one of those who have surrendered themselves to God'? (33)

وَمَنْ أَحْسَنُ قَوْلًا مِّمَّن دَعَا إِلَى اللَّهِ
وَعَمِلَ صَالِحًا وَقَالَ إِنَّنِي مِنَ
الْمُسْلِمِينَ ﴿٣٣﴾

Good and evil cannot be equal. Repel evil with what is better, and he who is your enemy will become as close to you as a true friend. (34)

وَلَا تَسْتَوِي الْحَسَنَةُ وَلَا السَّيِّئَةُ
ادْفَعْ بِالَّتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ فَإِذَا الَّذِي
بَيْنَكَ وَبَيْنَهُ عَدَاوَةٌ كَأَنَّهُ وَلِيٌّ
حَمِيمٌ ﴿٣٤﴾

Yet none will attain this except those who are patient in adversity; none will attain it except those endowed with truly great fortune. (35)

وَمَا يُلَقَّاهَا إِلَّا الَّذِينَ صَبَرُوا وَمَا يُلَقَّاهَا
إِلَّا ذُو حَظٍّ عَظِيمٍ ﴿٣٥﴾

If a prompting from Satan should stir you up, seek refuge with God. He alone is All-Hearing, All-Knowing. (36)

وَإِمَّا يَنزَغَنَّكَ مِنَ الشَّيْطَانِ نَزْغٌ
فَاسْتَعِذْ بِاللَّهِ ۖ إِنَّهُ هُوَ السَّمِيعُ
الْعَلِيمُ ﴿٣٦﴾

The Source of Divine Revelations

The *sūrah* opens with the two separate letters, *Ḥā. Mīm*. We have explained elsewhere the reason why many *sūrahs* start with separate letters of the Arabic alphabet. That this is often stated fits in with the Qur'ānic method of repeating references to the facts it wants our hearts to internalize. By nature, the human heart needs such repetition because it tends to forget with the passage of time. In order to instil a fact in one's conscience one needs to have it repeated in a variety of ways. The Qur'ān addresses the human heart with all the qualities instilled in its nature in accordance with its Creator's knowledge.

It is as if the two letters with which the *sūrah* starts, *Ḥā, Mīm*, are a name given to the *sūrah* or to the Qur'ān. The two letters constitute the subject of the first sentence while the predicate forms the next verse: "Ḥā, Mīm. *A revelation from the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.*" (Verses 1–2) Choosing to identify the Divine attributes of grace and mercy in connection with the revelation of the Qur'ān highlights the quality that is most characteristic of this revelation, namely Divine mercy. There is no doubt that the revelation of the Qur'ān is an act of mercy for all mankind. It is a mercy for those who believe in it and implement it as also for other creatures, not merely humans. The Qur'ān defines a code of living that brings good results for all. It has had a profound impact on the life of humanity, its concepts, values and course of action. Its impact is universal and consistent, ever since it was revealed. Those who study human history with true objectivity, following its course in its wider perspective, which includes all facets of human activity, are able to recognize this truth. Many of them have also recorded this in clear terms.

"*A book, the verses of which have been clearly spelled out as a discourse in Arabic for people of knowledge.*" (Verse 3) Spelling out the verses, clearly and distinctly, according to purpose, people's nature and mentality, generations, communities, psychologies and needs is a major characteristic of the Qur'ān. Its verses are indeed clearly expounded for people who are ready to learn and receive knowledge. In this way the Qur'ān gives good news to believers who put their faith in practice, and delivers warnings to those who reject its message and entertain

evil. It also explains why such good news and warnings have been given in a fine Arabic style to Arabic-speaking people. Most of them, however, refused its message, receiving it cooly: "*Yet, most of them turn away, so that they do not hear.*" (Verse 4)

This is indeed what they did, turning away so as not to hear or be exposed to the powerful logic of the Qur'ān. As the *sūrah* later informs us, they tried hard to persuade others not to listen to the Qur'ān. Of those that did listen their attitude was the same as those who did not: they all resisted the influence of the Qur'ān on their hearts. Thus they were like the deaf, deprived of their hearing faculty.

"*They say: Our hearts are veiled from whatever you call us to, and in our ears is deafness, and there is a barrier between us and you. So do you what you will, and so shall we.*" (Verse 5) Such was their stubbornness. They hoped that the Prophet would despair of them ever responding to him and that he would, therefore, stop calling on them to believe. They did so because of the powerful effect of what he said when they deliberately wanted not to believe. Thus, they said to the Prophet: our hearts are covered over so as not to allow your words any penetration, and the deafness in our ears prevents us from hearing you, and the barrier between you and us allows you no interaction with us. Therefore, leave us alone and do what you will. We will go our own separate way. Equally, they might carelessly have said: we will neither listen to what you say nor heed your warnings. You may do what you please. We will continue to follow our own ways, caring nothing for what you do or say.

This is just one example of what the first advocate of the message of Islam had to face. Yet, still he continued to call on people to accept his message, allowing no element of despair to creep into or disrupt his work. He never hastened the fulfilment of God's promise to him or the infliction of punishment on those who denied him. He acted instead upon instruction, declaring to people that putting the warnings into action was not up to him. He was no more than a human being receiving revelations and delivering a message. His task was to call on people to believe in God's oneness and to adhere to His message. He was also mandated to warn the idolaters. Once he had done this, matters

were left to God while he himself had no say in what was bound to happen: "*Say: I am but a human being like yourselves. It has been revealed to me that your God is the One and only God. Therefore, take the straight path to Him and seek His forgiveness. Woe to those who associate partners with Him.*" (Verse 6)

What perseverance! What endurance and what dedication! Only a person who has experienced at first hand something of this condition can appreciate the power and resilience required to persevere against such odds. Yet this perseverance is coupled with the realization that one has no say in what turn developments take. Yet the Prophet faced such unrelenting opposition, arrogance and carelessness, without ever requesting a miracle to silence his opponents.

In order to be able to face such situations, God's prophets and messengers were often directed to remain patient in adversity. Advocacy of the Divine message can only take the road of long patience and perseverance. The first thing that requires such patience is the advocate's keen desire to see the Divine message triumph, but then realize that such triumph is slow coming. Indeed, no sign of it may appear for a long time, yet those who undertake such advocacy must accept this willingly and without hesitation.

The maximum the Prophet could do in the face of such arrogant rejection and ridicule of his message was to say: "*Woe to those who associate partners with Him, and who do not pay the obligatory charity, and who refuse to believe in the life to come.*" (Verses 6–7) The fact that *zakāt*, or the obligatory charity, is specified here must have been in response to a certain situation, which we cannot now determine. This verse was revealed in Makkah, while *zakāt* was only imposed as a duty in the second year after the Prophet's migration to Madīnah. The overall requirement of *zakāt* was known about during the Makkan period, but only as a general requirement whereby people paid as they wished. Later, in Madīnah, this was modified to make it a specific duty with defined rates on different types of property. To disbelieve in the life to come is the essence of rejection of the Divine message, and it should be met with stern warnings. Some scholars argue that in this particular instance, *zakāt* means purity of faith. The general tone of the *sūrah* and the circumstances prevailing at the time admit this possibility.

Creation of the Earth

Continuing to advocate the Divine message, the Prophet puts before them the enormity of the offence they commit by associating partners with God and rejecting His message. He points first to the universe, in relation to which they are tiny and flimsy creatures. He shows them God's power as reflected in the nature of this universe of which they constitute only a small part. He wants to draw them out of the narrow angle through which they look at the Divine message. From that angle, they see themselves as large, occupying important positions. Preoccupied with their own selves, positions and interests, and the fact that Muḥammad was chosen by God in preference to them, they overlook the great truth expounded in the Qur'ān and set before them by Muḥammad. This great truth relates to the universe, to all generations of humanity, and carries absolutism that transcends time, place and people:

> *Say: Do you indeed disbelieve in Him who has created the earth in two days? And do you claim others to be His equals? It is He who is the Lord of all the worlds. He it is who placed on the earth firm mountains towering above it, and bestowed His blessings on it, and measured out its varied provisions in four days, ensuring equity for all who seek [such provisions]. Then, He applied His design to the sky, which was but smoke; and said to it and to the earth: 'Come, both of you, willingly or unwillingly.' They both said: 'We do come willingly.' So He decreed that they become seven heavens in two days, and assigned to each heaven its task. We adorned the sky nearest to the earth with lights, and made them secure. Such is the design of the Almighty, the All-Knowing.* (Verses 9–12)

When you declare disbelief, you are being nothing other than careless, gross and vulgar. You are denying the One who created the earth and placed firm structures over it, blessing it and assigning its varied provisions. He has indeed operated the systems of the universe, adorned the nearest sky with secure lights. Everything in the heavens and the earth willingly submit themselves to Him, while you, a mere single inhabitant on earth, arrogantly refuses to accept the truth. The

presentation of these facts in the *sūrah* typically shakes every heart: "*Say: Do you indeed disbelieve in Him who has created the earth in two days? And do you claim others to be His equals? It is He who is the Lord of all the worlds. He it is who placed on the earth firm mountains towering above it, and bestowed His blessings on it, and measured out its varied provisions in four days, ensuring equity for all who seek [such provisions].*" (Verses 9–10)

The *sūrah* begins here by mentioning the fact of creating the earth in two days and comments on this first stage of creation before telling us the rest of the story. The comment says: "*It is He who is the Lord of all the worlds,*" and yet you claim others to be His equals when it is He who created the earth you live on. How absurd and ghastly!

Then, what are these days: the two in which God created the earth and the two in which He placed the mountains above it, measured its provisions and showered His blessings? These are days of God, the length of which is known to Him alone. They are not the earthly days we know, because earth days are a time-measuring unit that came into existence after the creation of the earth. Just like the earth has its day, which is the length of time it takes to complete one full rotation of the sun, other planets have their days, some of which are longer and some shorter than an earth day. This means that those four days of the earth's creation and its provisions are measured by some other unit unknown to us. The closest we can surmise given our limited knowledge, is that they refer to the different stages the earth went through, divided into several eras, until its crust solidified and it settled into its present shape able to support the type of life we know. According to scientific theory, such stages took around two billion earth years.

These are only scientific estimates based on geological studies and soil and rock analyses. When we study the Qur'ān, we do not take such estimates as proven facts, for they are not. They are simply postulations open to amendment and change. Therefore, we do not interpret the Qur'ān on their basis. We conclude that they may be true if they are in agreement with the Qur'ānic text and serve to explain it without coercion. We say that a theory or a set of assumptions is closer to the truth because it is closer to the meaning of the Qur'ānic text.

Scientists now say that most probably the earth was originally a gas-like mass of flame just like the sun, and most probably it was once part of the sun before splitting away from it for some reason. It took long periods until its crust cooled down and solidified. Its centre remains in melting form because of the intense heat that melts even the hardest of rocks. In the early period when the crust solidified, it was composed of many layers of rock strata. Then at some other early stage, the oceans came into existence with water forming by the combination of two molecules of hydrogen with one molecule of oxygen.

> The air and the water on this planet of ours worked together to break the rocky surface, carry it and deposit it in different places so as to make a soil that allows plants to grow. The two of them thus managed to carve out portions of hills and mountains, and to fill valleys. Wherever you turn your eyes on earth, you will see the effects of a continuous process of construction and destruction.[1]
>
> The earth's crust is in a process of constant change. The sea shakes its waves to bring its effect on the land. Sea water evaporates by the heat of the sun and it goes up into the sky where it forms clouds which produce rain of fresh water, falling down in torrents to form rivers. As the rivers run, they affect the surface of the earth, carrying some of its rocks, changing them and depositing them elsewhere. Over centuries counted in hundreds and thousands, the surface of the earth changes completely. Snow that has solidified into ice brings another effect on the surface of the earth. Likewise, its surface is affected by the wind as also by the sun, with the heat and the light it sends to the earth. The creatures living on earth cause further changes, as do the volcanoes that bring lava to the surface.
>
> Should you ask a geologist about the rocks forming the earth's crust, he will give you a long list, but he will highlight three major

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1. Zakī, Aḥmad, *Ma'a Allāh fī al-Samā'* [With God in Heaven]. Dār al-Hilāl, Cairo, (n.d.) I could not locate this quotation in the book. – Editor's note.

types. He will tell you first about the igneous rocks which came out from the lower reaches of the earth to its surface in melted form, and then cooled down and solidified. He may cite as examples granite and basalt. He may show you a sample, indicating its crystalline composition, with white, red and black crystals, saying that each one of these contains a different chemical compound. Thus, he points out that these rocks are in fact a solid mix. The geologist may further draw your attention to the fact that it was out of such igneous rocks that the surface of the earth was originally made in the early stages of its formation. Then different factors came into play: water falling from the sky or running in rivers or lying in the form of ice, air, wind and sun. They all worked hard changing the nature and the chemistry of the earth's surface, bringing into existence totally different rocks that have no similarity to the original ones.

The geologist will then speak to you about depository rocks, which make the second and largest type of rock. These are the ones which have been carved by natural factors or by man out of rocks that are firmer and more solid. They are called depository because they are no longer in their original places. They have been lifted and carried by water or wind and then settled somewhere else on earth. The geologist will cite limestone as an example of such depository rocks. Limestone forms mountains, such as al-Muqaṭṭam which provides the building material for all buildings in Cairo. He will tell you that limestone is made of a chemical compound known as calcium carbonates, produced by biological or chemical factors. Sand, clay and argillaceous earth are other examples of depository rocks and they are all formed from different origins.

When you enquire about these origins you are told that all depository rocks come from igneous ones. When the crust of the earth formed in the distant past, there was nothing on its solidified surface except igneous rocks. Then rain and sea water interacted with it. The air then came into play in the form of chemical gases, winds and gales, heat and light from the sun and all these elements began to interact according to their different natures. They thus

> changed the useless, hard igneous rock into rocks that can be used to build houses and rocks from which minerals can be extracted. More importantly, it changed the hard solid rock to make depository soil that can support life.
>
> Granite does not make the sort of earth surface fit for plants or irrigation. Such surface is provided by soil which ultimately came out of granite and similar rocks. When such soil was in place, plants grew allowing animals to exist. Then the earth became a fit abode for the head of all these creatures on earth, man.[2]

This journey long as it may be thought of by modern scientists, can help us to understand the meaning of the days in which the earth was created, firm mountains placed on it, then its blessing and the measuring of its different provisions in four days. We do not know the length of these four days, but we know that they are undoubtedly different from earth days.

A Blessed Planet

We need to dwell for a moment on every phrase of this Qur'ānic text before we turn our attention to the mention of the heavens in the next verse.

"*He it is who placed on the earth firm mountains towering above it.*" (Verse 10) Mountains are often described in the Qur'ān as 'firm', and in some instances the purpose of their positioning is that they 'prevent' the earth from shaking or swaying. This means that the mountains are firm in themselves and stabilize the earth, ensuring that it remains well balanced. In times gone by, people used to think that the earth was based on firm foundations. They are told today that the earth is nothing more than a small ball that floats in a great expanse, without support. They may be scared when they listen to such words for the first time, and some of them may begin to look warily askance, worried that the earth might shake or fall in deep space. Let such people be reassured. God's hand holds the heavens and the earth, preventing their

2. Ibid., pp. 96–98.

disappearance. Should they vanish, no one else would hold them in place. Such people should banish worrying thoughts, because the laws that govern the universe are set in operation by the Almighty who holds sway over all things.

The same scientist says:

> Every event that takes place on earth, whether on its surface or below it, causing one substance to be transferred from one place to another, has a bearing on the speed of the earth as it moves in its orbit. This is not affected only by the cycle of the tide. Even when rivers carry water from one place of the earth to another, this affects the speed of its movement. The blowing wind and whatever falls into the sea or protrudes on the surface has an effect on the earth's speed as it moves in orbit. Another thing that affects such speed is any expansion or retraction of its size, even though it increases or decreases by no more than a few feet.[3]

With the earth being so sensitive, it is no wonder that firm mountains are positioned over it to ensure its stability and that it does not 'sway with you', as expressed in verse 15 of *Sūrah* 16.

And He "*bestowed His blessings on it, and measured out its varied provisions.*" (Verse 10) When our predecessors read this statement, they used to think of the vegetation that grows on earth and the useful minerals God has placed in it, such as gold, silver, iron and the like. Now that we have learnt more of the great blessings God has bestowed on this planet and of the provisions He has placed in it over long periods of time, this statement gives us a much broader meaning.

We have mentioned how some elements in the air combine to produce water, while the combination of others produce the soil that supports vegetation, and another process gives us rain, the source of all fresh water in rivers, wells and springs. All this reflects the blessing God bestowed on the earth and its measured provisions.

Then, there is also the air we breathe:

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3. Ibid., p. 82.

The earth is a circle covered with a rocky crust, and the greater part of this crust is covered by a layer of water, while above both the crust and water there is air, a thick gas layer similar to the sea, with different depths. All living creatures, man, animal and plant, live in this layer enjoying what it gives us.

As we breathe we obtain the oxygen necessary for us, while plants grow their structure using carbon, or rather carbon dioxide. We eat plants, and also eat animals which in turn eat plants, and in doing so ensure our physical growth. The nitrogen in the air is needed to reduce its content of oxygen. If we were to inhale oxygen on its own, we would be burnt by breathing. There remains in the air the evaporated water which gives it its freshness, and the hydrogen, as well as small quantities of other gases, such as helium and neon. Most probably these were part of the original composition of the earth and remained in the air.[4]

The provisions we need for survival are wider in scope than the food we eat. Yet all our food is composed of the basic elements that are present in the earth or in the air. Sugar, for example, is a compound of carbon, hydrogen and oxygen, while water is made of oxygen and hydrogen. The same applies to everything we eat, drink, wear or use as a tool. They are all made of the earth's elements.

All this refers in some way to the blessing bestowed on the earth and the measured provisions placed in it, over a period of four of God's days, the length of which is known only to Him.

A Design for the Sky

Then, He applied His design to the sky, which was but smoke; and said to it and to the earth: 'Come, both of you, willingly or unwillingly.' They both said: 'We do come willingly.' So He decreed that they become seven heavens in two days, and assigned to each

4. Ibid., p. 100.

> *heaven its task. We adorned the sky nearest to the earth with lights, and made them secure. Such is the design of the Almighty, the All-Knowing.* (Verses 11–12)

What is meant here by the application of God's design is that it was His will to do so. The word, 'then', may not signify a chronological order; rather, it may mean turning to something higher. In our sense, the sky is higher. "*Then, He applied His design to the sky, which was but smoke.*" (Verse 11) Scientists believe that before the existence of stars there was what they call the nebula, a cloud of gas, or rather, smoke.

> The nebulas, bright or dark, contain gas and dust, which is nothing other than what is left after the creation of the stars. The theory says that the galaxy was first formed of gas and dust, from which all stars were formed by a process of deposition and sedimentation. Yet some of the gas and dust remained, and from the remainder, the nebulas formed. Yet in this great galaxy remains a large quantity, equal to that which went into the formation of the stars. The stars continue to pull some of it by gravity, which means that the stars are dusting the sky to remove what is left, yet these dusters are too few in relation to the amount that needs to be dusted away and the space that needs to be cleaned.[5]

This may be true because it is close to the meaning of the Qur'ānic statement: "*Then, He applied His design to the sky, which was but smoke.*" (Verse 11) It is also closer to the fact that the creation of the skies was completed over a very long period of time, taking two of God's days.

A Willing Submission

The verse then adds a statement expressing an awesome truth: "*and said to it and to the earth: Come, both of you, willingly or unwillingly. They both said: We do come willingly.*" (Verse 11) This is a remarkable

5. Ibid., pp. 191–192.

reference to the fact of the universe being under God's control. It submits to its Creator and willingly does His bidding. This leaves only man who, in most cases, submits to God's law unwillingly. The law inevitably applies to him and he cannot take himself out of its domain. Man is no more than a little gear in the great machinery of the universe. All universal laws apply to him, whether he likes them or not. Yet he is the only creature who does not make the same submission as the earth and the sky. He always tries to deviate from an easy and smooth path, and, thus, he collides with the laws of nature, which will inevitably overpower him. He will then submit, albeit unwillingly. Exceptions to this are God's servants who, in their hearts, concepts, desires and actions, are not in conflict with the overall Divine law. These people submit willingly and find their way easy and smooth. They move in line with the movement of the universe, turning to God and living in harmony with all that exists. They are able to achieve wonders and produce miracles. They have no conflict with any force in the universe; on the contrary, they derive from its powers.

We, humans, submit to God's law unwillingly. How much better it would be for us to submit willingly, as do the earth and the skies. We would then enjoy the happiness that results from being consistent with the rest of the universe. At times, we also come up with what is absurd! The wheel of God's will turns in the way, direction and speed set for it, turning the universe with it according to well defined laws of nature. Yet we, out of all creation in the universe, try to force the wheel to run faster or slower, responding to what may motivate us of worry, selfishness, greed, fear or desire. We may move to this side or that, while the rest of creation moves along a well defined way. This inevitably means that we run into a collision here or there, endure pain or suffer a fatal crash. Thus, all our efforts and power go to waste. We should know, however, that when we truly believe, submit to God and relate to the rest of the universe, we will clearly understand our role, coordinate our movements with those of the universe, and move at the right time and speed, within the right space. Thus our movements will benefit by the power God has placed in the universe to produce truly great results. We will experience no arrogance or conceit because we know

the source of the power that enabled us to accomplish our great deeds. We will be certain that we do not achieve such results by our own efforts working in isolation. Instead, we achieve them when only we derive all that we do from the greatest power.

When we do this on our short journey spent on planet earth that submits willingly to God, we feel happy, comfortable and reassured. Indeed, the whole planet joins us on its own journey to its Lord. Moreover, we will enjoy the great peace that pours into our spirits as we live in a friendly universe submitting to its Lord. We will join the universe in willing submission to Him and, as a result, we will have no conflict with the universe, because we are part of it and we move with it in the same direction.

"*They both said: We do come willingly. So He decreed that they become seven heavens in two days, and assigned to each heaven its task.*" (Verses 11–12) These two days may be the same as those in which the stars were formed from the nebulas, or during which the creation was completed as God only knows how. The assignment of tasks to each heaven refers to the operation of the natural laws in them, in accordance with God's directives. What, then, does the term 'heaven' mean? We have no definite answer. The word may refer to a measure of distance. On the other hand, each galaxy may be called a heaven, or several galaxies with varying distances may be called heavens. The word also admits several other possibilities.

"*We adorned the sky nearest to the earth with lights, and made them secure.*" (Verse 12) Again the sky nearest to the earth can have several meanings. It could be the nearest galaxy to us, known as the Milky Way, which has a diameter of about 150,000 light years. It could mean something else that comprises stars and planets that shine for us like lights. These skies are 'made secure' from devilment, as can be understood from other references in the Qur'ān. Quite what this entails is beyond our grasp and hence our knowledge is limited to what the Qur'ān tells us.

"*Such is the design of the Almighty, the All-Knowing.*" (Verse 12) Can anyone other than Him design all this? Can anyone other than the Almighty who knows all control the whole universe and conduct its affairs?

What Punishment for Turning Away?

Given this is the state of the entire universe, what position should be assigned to those who reject God's oneness and attribute partners to Him? How should their reckless arrogance be requited?

> *If they turn away, say: 'I warn you of a thunderbolt like the thunderbolt that struck the 'Ād and Thamūd.' There came to them, from all directions, messengers saying: 'Worship none but God.' They answered: 'If our Lord had wished, He would have sent down angels. We will never believe in your message.' As for the 'Ād, they behaved arrogantly through the land, against all right, and said: 'Who is mightier than us?' Did they not realize that God, who created them, was mightier than them? They continued to reject Our revelations. Therefore, We let loose upon them a howling gale raging through several days of misfortune, so as to give them, in the life of this world, a foretaste of humiliating suffering. Yet the suffering in the life to come will be even more humiliating, and they will have none to help them. As for the Thamūd, We offered them guidance, but they chose blindness in preference to guidance. Therefore, the thunderbolt of humiliating suffering struck them in consequence of what they had wrought. And We saved those who believed and were God-fearing.* (Verses 13–18)

A warning against the type of thunderbolts that struck the peoples of 'Ād and Thamūd strikes fear in their hearts. It suits the terrible offence they commit. It answers the idolaters' arrogance referred to at the beginning of the *sūrah* showing them to be the only ones in the universe who reject the truth.

What sort of effect did this warning have on the unbelievers in Makkah? Ibn Isḥāq, an early biographer of the Prophet, gives us the following story:

> One day, as 'Utbah ibn Rabī'ah, one of the Quraysh chiefs, was sitting with a group of Quraysh notables, he noticed the Prophet sitting alone close to the Ka'bah. 'Utbah suggested to his friends: "Shall we go to Muḥammad and make him some offers? He may

have been spared the trouble. If he wins, whatever glory he achieves will be yours." They retorted: "He has certainly bewitched you." He said: "I have stated my opinion, and you can do as you wish."

Another report by Jābir suggests that when the Prophet recited these verses, 'Utbah listened. When the Prophet read verse 13 which says: "*If they turn away, say: I warn you of a thunderbolt like the thunderbolt that struck the 'Ād and Thamūd,*" 'Utbah put his hand on the Prophet's mouth and appealed to him by the ties of kinship to his people to do nothing of the sort. Then 'Utbah left him, went home and stayed in doors. His people talked to him later about this and he explained his position: "When Muḥammad spoke this warning, I appealed to him not to do so. You know that when Muḥammad says something, he does not lie. I feared that such punishment be inflicted on you."

The Warning and Its Effect

This is, then, one image of the effect of the warning as stated by God's messenger to a person who did not believe in his message. Before we move on, we need to reflect a little on the image of the Prophet as he listened to 'Utbah making his petty proposals, his refined manners and his focus on the great issue in question. Although the proposals 'Utbah made sounded worthless, the Prophet listened attentively, without interrupting his interlocutor. He remained calm and friendly. When 'Utbah stopped speaking, the Prophet then graciously asked him: "Have you, Abū al-Walīd, finished what you have to say?" Then when 'Utbah confirmed that he had finished, the Prophet said: "Then listen to me." He waited until 'Utbah said, "I will do," before he read to him God's own words. Throughout he was friendly, calm, confident and reassured. This is typical of how the Prophet always captured his audience's attention, even though they might at the beginning jeer him and take a hostile stand. His was always a most admirable attitude. It is certainly as God says: "*God knows best whom to entrust with His message.*" (6: 124)

What does this warning signify: "*If they turn away, say: I warn you of a thunderbolt like the thunderbolt that struck the 'Ād and Thamūd.*"

(Verse 13) Essentially, it begins a fresh round showing us images of the fates met by earlier communities who rejected God's message. The reckless arrogance of the present unbelievers is thus made all the more apparent through this reminder of what happened to similarly reckless and arrogant peoples: "*There came to them, from all directions, messengers saying: Worship none but God.*" (Verse 14) This is the single issue as presented by all God's messengers; it states the central point in every Divine religion.

"*They answered: 'If our Lord had wished, He would have sent down angels. We will never believe in your message.*" (Verse 14) Similarly, this represents the same point of doubt faced by every messenger. Yet a messenger addressing human beings could not be other than human. This so that he would know the people he addressed and they would know him. In essence, a messenger should provide a practical example and share his people's problems. Yet the 'Ād and Thamūd declared themselves unbelievers simply because the messengers sent to them were human like themselves. They were not angels as they wanted them to be.

Up to this point, the *sūrah* speaks of the fates of both peoples as if they are one: both were struck by thunderbolts. Now, the *sūrah* gives us some specific details about both peoples: "*As for the 'Ād, they behaved arrogantly through the land, against all right, and said: Who is mightier than us?*" (Verse 15) The right attitude is that all creatures should submit to God and that people should not behave arrogantly. Who, then, are the 'Ād in comparison to God's great creation? All arrogant behaviour, by whatever creature, is against all right. Yet these people thought themselves powerful. They asked: "*Who is mightier than us?*" This is the false sense exhibited by all tyrants when they feel that they have silenced all opposition and that none can stand against their power. They forget the truth: "*Did they not realize that God, who created them, was mightier than them?*" This is a basic truth: the One who originated them is more powerful than they. He was the One who enabled them to exercise their power in the first place, albeit in the limited measure He allowed them. Yet tyrants always overlook facts: "*They continued to reject Our revelations.*" (Verse 15)

We see them here boasting of their power, thinking themselves mighty. The image portrayed in the next verse shows us the fate their despicable arrogance deserved: "*Therefore, We let loose upon them a howling gale raging through several days of misfortune, so as to give them, in the life of this world, a foretaste of humiliating suffering.*" (Verse 16) It was a freezing gale lasting several days that brought them great misfortune. What was more was their humiliation in this life: a fitting response to their arrogance towards God's servants. Yet all this was a first instalment, a punishment in the life of this world. They will not escape further punishment in the life to come: "*Yet the suffering in the life to come will be even more humiliating, and they will have none to help them.*" (Verse 16)

"*As for the Thamūd, We offered them guidance, but they chose blindness in preference to guidance.*" (Verse 17) This appears to be a reference to their initial acceptance of God's message after they had seen the miracle of the she-camel which drank as much as all their other camels and cattle. However, they reverted to disbelief shortly after this, preferring to remain blind, straying from the path of truth. This is the worst type of blindness. "*Therefore, the thunderbolt of humiliating suffering struck them in consequence of what they had wrought.*" (Verse 17) Humiliation is the most fitting outcome for such an attitude. It is not merely a punishment of destruction; it adds the suffering of humiliation.

"*And We saved those who believed and were God-fearing.*" (Verse 18) The round is thus concluded. They should realize by now that nothing can withstand God's power. No one can give or seek protection against Him.

Unusual Witnesses

They have been told of God's power over the universe and mankind. Now the *sūrah* tells them of His power over their own selves. They have no authority over themselves, and no part of them is beyond the reach of His power. Even their ears, eyes and skins obey Him. They too disobey them so as to be witnesses against them on the Day of Judgement.

> *On the day when God's enemies will be gathered together before the fire, they will be driven onwards until, when they reach it, their ears, their eyes and their very skins will bear witness against them, speaking of what they used to do [on earth]. They will ask their skins: 'Why did you bear witness against us?' To which they will reply: 'God, who gave speech to all things, has made us speak. It is He who created you in the first instance, and to Him you now return. You did not try to hide yourselves so that your ears, eyes and skins could not be made to testify against you. Yet you thought that God did not know much of what you were doing. And it is this thought of yours which you entertained about your Lord that brought you to perdition, so that you are now among the lost.' If they resign themselves to patience, the fire will be their home; and if they pray to be allowed to make amends, they will not be allowed to do so.* (Verses 19–24)

There is a great surprise in this very difficult situation in which they see their own senses and faculties obeying God and doing as they are bid. In this situation they are branded as 'enemies of God'! What fate will God's enemies suffer? They are herded together, from all generations, like a flock of sheep, and driven to the fire. When they stand close to it and the reckoning begins, they find themselves facing witnesses whom they did not reckon with. Their tongues, long used to lie, fabricate falsehood and engage in ridicule are now tied, while their ears, eyes and skins rebel against them obeying their Lord. They report on what they used to consider secret. They used to hide themselves, thinking that God would not see them conceal their intentions and crimes. But they did not try to hide themselves from their own ears, eyes or skins. How could they, when these faculties are part of them? Now, these publicize what the unbelievers thought to be concealed from all creatures and from God Almighty as well.

As God so commands their own organs, they are overwhelmed and respond in complete obedience: "*They will ask their skins: Why did you bear witness against us?*" (Verse 21) They will put the facts clearly before them, attempting to hide nothing: "*To which they will reply: God, who gave speech to all things, has made us speak.*" (Verse 21) It is He who made tongues the organs of speech. He can easily give speech to

other organs. He gave speech to all things, making them speak and explain things as they are. "*It is He who created you in the first instance, and to Him you now return.*" (Verse 21) From Him all originate, and to Him all shall return. There is no escape from His authority, neither at the beginning, nor at the end. Their minds used to deny this; now their skins state it to them in an undeniable way.

The remainder of the comments may be a continuation of what their own organs say to them, or equally it may be a comment on this amazing situation: "*You did not try to hide yourselves so that your ears, eyes and skins could not be made to testify against you.*" (Verse 22) It never occurred to you that these, your organs, could rebel against you. In fact, you could not have hidden yourselves from your organs even if you had tried. "*Yet you thought that God did not know much of what you were doing.*" (Verse 22) Your foolish and ignorant thoughts deceived you, leading you to hell: "*And it is this thought of yours which you entertained about your Lord that brought you to perdition, so that you are now among the lost.*" (Verse 23)

We then have the final comment: "*If they resign themselves to patience, the fire will be their home.*" (Verse 24) What an absurd situation. Patience now entails enduring the fire. It is no longer the patience that withstands adversity in order to achieve a cherished goal and earn reward from God. It is a sort of patience that incurs the penalty of hell where they abide: "*And if they pray to be allowed to make amends, they will not be allowed to do so.*" (Verse 24)

There is no way back, no remonstration or acknowledgement of error will suffice. It is customary for admissions of error to be coupled with a request for forgiveness, after removing the causes of strained relations. Now, no admission of error is allowed, let alone forgiveness and improved relations.

Control Over Human Souls

The *sūrah* also shows them how God's power extends over their hearts and minds, even when they are still on earth refusing to believe in Him. Since He is fully aware that their hearts have become corrupt, He lets some evil entities, from among both humans and *jinn*, befriend

them and make what is evil seem fair and goodly. Thus, they lead them astray until they join those who ruin themselves and become liable to punishment:

> *We have assigned to the unbelievers companions who made their past and present seem goodly to them, but the sentence has fallen due upon them together with bygone generations of* jinn *and humans. They will indeed be lost.* (Verse 25)

They are too proud to worship God when they are subject to His power. Their own hearts lead them to ruin and ultimately to God's punishment. God allocates them wicked companions who whisper in their ears, assuring them that all the evil they see around them is good, and who present their own bad deeds to them in a fair appearance so that they do not see how foul these are. Perhaps the worst thing that can happen to man is that he loses his balanced judgement and can no longer see how foul or deviant his actions are. In this way, he perceives everything he does as good and fair. Inevitably, though, this leads him to ruin. When the unbelievers reach this stage, they find themselves among the lost herd of past communities that suffered God's punishment: "*They will indeed be lost.*" (Verse 25)

One aspect of what such wicked companions persuaded them to do was to fight the Qur'ān when they realized how powerful was its argument: "*The unbelievers say: Do not listen to this Qur'ān, but drown it in frivolous talk, so that you may gain the upper hand.*" (Verse 26) The elders of the Quraysh in Makkah used to counsel each other to do just this, and they also persuaded the masses to do the same. They realized that they were no match for the Qur'ān, its beauty, power and eloquence: "*Do not listen to this Qur'ān.*" (Verse 26) They claimed that it cast a magical spell over their minds and ruined their lives, causing division between a man and his children or a man and his wife. It is true that the Qur'ān causes such division, but only through God's criterion that separates faith from unfaith, and guidance from going astray. The Qur'ān wins people's hearts so that they no longer value any other bond as they do their bond of faith. Thus, it was known as *al-Furqān*, meaning 'The Criterion'.

"*Do not listen to this Qur'ān, but drown it in frivolous talk, so that you may gain the upper hand.*" (Verse 26) Such frivolity is totally unbecoming, yet it was the result of their knowing that they could not combat the Qur'ān with logic or consistent argument. Those who persist in such disbelief can basically do nothing other than drown out the voice of the Qur'ān with their own frivolities. They used to do this in a variety of ways: Mālik ibn al-Naḍr, for example, used to sit and relate accounts of Rustum and other Persian kings in order to impress people so that they would not listen to the Qur'ān, while others used to shout and make noises or recited poetry and rhymes. All this, however, came to nothing while the Qur'ān retained its power because it is the word of the truth, and the truth is overpowering.

In response to their singular remark they are given a stern warning: "*We shall most certainly give the unbelievers a taste of severe suffering; and We shall most certainly requite them according to the worst of their deeds. Such is the requital of the enemies of God: the fire will be their lasting home: a fit requital for their having knowingly rejected Our revelations.*" (Verses 27–28) We soon see them suffering in hell and see how the deluded are so angry with the ones who led them astray. They realize now that it was they who led them to their fate when they persuaded them that their foul deeds were fair and goodly. "*The unbelievers say: Our Lord! Show us those* jinn *and men who have led us astray. We shall trample them under our feet so that they shall be among the lowest of the low.*" (Verse 29) They are not merely angry with them; they want to exact revenge: "*We shall trample them under our feet.*" What a contrast with their close friendly ties in this present world.

A different type of bond is that which the believers have. These are the ones who take the right path of endeavour to do only what is good. God assigns to them angels to give them reassurance, bring them the good news of their prospects in heaven and to be their guardians, both in the life of this world and the world to come:

> *As for those who say: 'Our Lord is God,' and then steadfastly pursue the right way, the angels will descend on them, saying: Have no fear, and do not grieve, but rejoice in the good news of Paradise which you have been promised. We are your guardians in the life of*

> *this world and in the life to come. There you shall have all that your souls desire, and all that you ask for, as a ready welcome from Him who is Much-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful.* (Verses 30–32)

To remain steadfast in pursuing what is entailed by the declaration, '*Our Lord is God,*' means to keep it alive in one's conscience, to give proof to it in one's life and to discharge the responsibilities it imposes. This is serious, important and hard work. Therefore, it deserves the abundant grace God grants them: a friendly relation with angels who, as God tells us, reassure the believers with sweet words: "*Have no fear, and do not grieve, but rejoice in the good news of Paradise which you have been promised. We are your guardians in the life of this world and in the life to come.*" (Verses 30–31) They also describe heaven to them, knowing that they will have there all that they desire and is pleasing to them. They make it even more inviting and pleasing by saying that it is "*a ready welcome from Him who is Much-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful.*" (Verse 32) It is a gift from God and a place assigned to them through His forgiveness and endless mercy.

What Image for the Advocate of Islam

This part of the *sūrah* concludes by painting an image of the advocate of the Divine faith, describing his personality, discourse and fine manners. God's messenger, and indeed every advocate of God's way, are called on to adopt such ways. The *sūrah* began by describing the hostile attitude of those called upon to accept the faith and how they met this call with arrogance. Now, the advocates of Divine faith are being told what course to follow, regardless of how their advocacy is met and how their efforts are received:

> *Who speaks better than he who calls people to God, does what is right, and says, 'I am one of those who have surrendered themselves to God'? Good and evil cannot be equal. Repel evil with what is better, and he who is your enemy will become as close to you as a true friend. Yet none will attain this except those who are patient in adversity; none will attain it except those endowed with truly great fortune. If*

a prompting from Satan should stir you up, seek refuge with God. He alone is All-Hearing, All-Knowing. (Verses 33–36)

An advocate of the Divine faith must put his addressees face to face with reality. He has to confront people's deviation, ignorance, inflated appreciation of their own deeds, as also their instinctive abhorrence of being told that they are wrong. He is opposed by people's determination to serve their own interests and maintain positions that might be threatened by the principle of equality of all people, which is basic to Divine faith. To face all this as part of the task of advocating Divine faith is indeed very hard. Yet it is something truly great: "*Who speaks better than he who calls people to God, does what is right, and says, 'I am one of those who have surrendered themselves to God'?*" (Verse 33)

Taking all this into account, a word of advocacy, calling on people to believe in God's oneness, is the best word that may be said on earth. It is at the forefront of good words that are raised to God in heaven, provided it is endorsed by good action and confirmed with self surrender to Him. Thus, such advocacy becomes pure and sincere, free of self interest. The advocate's aim is merely to discharge his duty by presenting the Divine message. Once he has discharged his duty, he should not care whether his words are rejected or whether people are rude or boastful in their denials. He is merely presenting what is good, which puts him in the higher position. Anyone who opposes him entertains evil, and, as such, is far below an advocate of God: "*Good and evil cannot be equal.*" (Verse 34) Advocates of the Divine message cannot return evil with its like. A good deed cannot be equal in its impact or value to a bad one. Patient perseverance, forbearance and rising above the desire to return evil with its like eventually brings people back to their senses. Their earlier hardness softens and they become friendly: "*Repel evil with what is better, and he who is your enemy will become as close to you as a true friend.*" (Verse 34)

This rule proves true in the overwhelming majority of cases: a stormy attitude will be replaced by calmness, fury by cordiality and arrogance by humility. All this may result from a good word, a soft tone and a smile to meet the fury of one whose anger gets the better of him. Had

such a person been met with a similarly furious approach, he would only be more quarrelsome and completely lose his self control.

Such a forbearing attitude requires a great heart, one that can forgive when it might otherwise return evil with its like. Such ability is necessary for forbearance to be effective. Otherwise, forbearance may be thought a mark of weakness. If the party resorting to evil feels that a kindly attitude results from weakness, he will not respect it. Indeed, kindness will not have any effect on the matter. Moreover, such kindness and forbearance are limited to personal insults and injuries. When the attack is levelled at believers' faith, trying to turn them away from it, then every form of resistance should be employed, or else, we remain patient in adversity until God makes His judgement in the matter.

Such forbearance, which requires us to repel an evil deed with a good one, rising above feelings of anger, is a sublime grade which cannot be attained by everyone. It does not merely require patience in the face of adversity; it is also a blessing which God bestows on His servants who try hard to achieve it: "*Yet none will attain this except those who are patient in adversity; none will attain it except those endowed with truly great fortune.*" (Verse 35) We say that it is a sublime grade; in fact it is so sublime that Muḥammad, God's messenger, who never showed anger for anything personal, yet nothing could stand to his anger when it was for God's sake, is told, as indeed every advocate of the Divine message is told: "*If a prompting from Satan should stir you up, seek refuge with God. He alone is All-Hearing, All-Knowing.*" (Verse 36) Anger may open the way to Satan's prompting who will then try to persuade us to be impatient and unforgiving when others resort to evil. In such a situation, we will do well to seek refuge with God against Satan. This is the best shelter against Satan's efforts to exploit our anger.

God, man's Creator, knows the keys to each and every heart, as well as its abilities and qualities. He knows where and how Satan can penetrate his machinations. Therefore, He protects the advocates of His message from stirred up anger as we face what excites the fury of even the most forbearing of us. Yet this too is a difficult road to follow, requiring that we submit here, as in every situation, to Divine directives, to the exclusion of all else.

2

No Concealment from God

Among His signs are the night and the day, and the sun and the moon. Do not prostrate yourselves before the sun or the moon; but prostrate yourselves before God, who has created them, if it is Him you really worship. (37)

وَمِنْ ءَايَٰتِهِ ٱلَّيْلُ وَٱلنَّهَارُ وَٱلشَّمْسُ
وَٱلْقَمَرُ ۚ لَا تَسْجُدُوا۟ لِلشَّمْسِ وَلَا لِلْقَمَرِ
وَٱسْجُدُوا۟ لِلَّهِ ٱلَّذِى خَلَقَهُنَّ إِن
كُنتُمْ إِيَّاهُ تَعْبُدُونَ ٣٧

If the unbelievers are too arrogant, those who are with your Lord glorify Him night and day and never grow weary of that. (38)

فَإِنِ ٱسْتَكْبَرُوا۟ فَٱلَّذِينَ عِندَ
رَبِّكَ يُسَبِّحُونَ لَهُۥ بِٱلَّيْلِ وَٱلنَّهَارِ
وَهُمْ لَا يَسْـَٔمُونَ ۩ ٣٨

Another of His signs is this: you see the earth lying desolate, but when We send down rain water upon it, it stirs and swells [with life]. He who brings it to life will surely give life to the dead. He has power over all things. (39)

وَمِنْ ءَايَٰتِهِۦٓ أَنَّكَ تَرَى ٱلْأَرْضَ خَٰشِعَةً
فَإِذَآ أَنزَلْنَا عَلَيْهَا ٱلْمَآءَ ٱهْتَزَّتْ وَرَبَتْ ۚ
إِنَّ ٱلَّذِىٓ أَحْيَاهَا لَمُحْىِ ٱلْمَوْتَىٰٓ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ
عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَىْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ٣٩

Those who distort the meaning of Our revelations are not hidden from Us. Who is in a better state: he who is cast into the fire, or he who shall come safe on Resurrection Day? Do what you will; He sees all that you do. (40)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ يُلْحِدُونَ فِىٓ ءَايَٰتِنَا لَا يَخْفَوْنَ
عَلَيْنَآ ۗ أَفَمَن يُلْقَىٰ فِى ٱلنَّارِ خَيْرٌ أَم مَّن يَأْتِىٓ
ءَامِنًا يَوْمَ ٱلْقِيَٰمَةِ ۚ ٱعْمَلُوا۟ مَا شِئْتُمْ ۖ إِنَّهُۥ
بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ بَصِيرٌ ﴿٤٠﴾

Those who reject this reminder [i.e. the Qur'ān] when it comes to them ... It is indeed a sublime book; (41)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ بِٱلذِّكْرِ لَمَّا جَآءَهُمْ ۖ
وَإِنَّهُۥ لَكِتَٰبٌ عَزِيزٌ ﴿٤١﴾

no falsehood can ever touch it openly or in a stealthy manner. It is bestowed from on high by One who is wise, worthy of praise. (42)

لَّا يَأْتِيهِ ٱلْبَٰطِلُ مِنۢ بَيْنِ يَدَيْهِ وَلَا مِنْ
خَلْفِهِۦ ۖ تَنزِيلٌ مِّنْ حَكِيمٍ حَمِيدٍ ﴿٤٢﴾

Nothing is being said to you other than what was said to the messengers sent before your time. Your Lord is the Lord of forgiveness, but He also inflicts painful punishment. (43)

مَّا يُقَالُ لَكَ إِلَّا مَا قَدْ قِيلَ لِلرُّسُلِ
مِن قَبْلِكَ ۚ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ لَذُو مَغْفِرَةٍ وَذُو
عِقَابٍ أَلِيمٍ ﴿٤٣﴾

Had We willed to make this revelation a discourse in a non-Arabic tongue, they would have said: 'If only its verses were clearly spelled out! Why [a message in] a non-Arabic tongue and an Arab [messenger]?' Say: 'This is guidance and healing for all those who believe; but as for the unbelievers: there is deafness in

وَلَوْ جَعَلْنَٰهُ قُرْءَانًا أَعْجَمِيًّا لَّقَالُوا۟ لَوْلَا
فُصِّلَتْ ءَايَٰتُهُۥٓ ۖ ءَا۬عْجَمِىٌّ وَعَرَبِىٌّ ۗ قُلْ
هُوَ لِلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ هُدًى وَشِفَآءٌ ۖ
وَٱلَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ فِىٓ ءَاذَانِهِمْ

their ears, and they are blind to it.' They are, as it were, being called to from too far away. (44)

وَقْرٌ وَهُوَ عَلَيْهِمْ عَمًى ۚ أُولَٰٓئِكَ
يُنَادَوْنَ مِن مَّكَانٍ بَعِيدٍ ﴿٤٤﴾

We gave the Book to Moses but disputes arose about it. Had it not been for a decree that had already been issued by your Lord, all would have been decided between them. As it is, they are in grave, disquieting doubt about it. (45)

وَلَقَدْ ءَاتَيْنَا مُوسَى ٱلْكِتَٰبَ فَٱخْتُلِفَ
فِيهِ ۗ وَلَوْلَا كَلِمَةٌ سَبَقَتْ مِن
رَّبِّكَ لَقُضِيَ بَيْنَهُمْ ۚ وَإِنَّهُمْ لَفِى
شَكٍّ مِّنْهُ مُرِيبٍ ﴿٤٥﴾

Whoever does what is right does so for his own good; and whoever does evil will himself bear its consequences. Your Lord is never unjust to His creatures. (46)

مَّنْ عَمِلَ صَٰلِحًا فَلِنَفْسِهِۦ ۖ وَمَنْ
أَسَآءَ فَعَلَيْهَا ۗ وَمَا رَبُّكَ بِظَلَّٰمٍ
لِّلْعَبِيدِ ﴿٤٦﴾

Knowledge of the Last Hour belongs to Him alone. No fruit comes out of its calyx and no female ever conceives or gives birth, without His knowledge. And so, on the Day when He shall call out to them, 'Where now are those alleged partners of Mine?' They will say, 'We confess to You that none of us can vouch for them.' (47)

إِلَيْهِ يُرَدُّ عِلْمُ ٱلسَّاعَةِ ۚ وَمَا تَخْرُجُ مِن
ثَمَرَٰتٍ مِّنْ أَكْمَامِهَا وَمَا تَحْمِلُ
مِنْ أُنثَىٰ وَلَا تَضَعُ إِلَّا بِعِلْمِهِۦ ۚ وَيَوْمَ
يُنَادِيهِمْ أَيْنَ شُرَكَآءِى قَالُوٓا۟
ءَاذَنَّٰكَ مَا مِنَّا مِن شَهِيدٍ ﴿٤٧﴾

Whatever they used to invoke before will have forsaken them; and they will know that there is no escape for them. (48)

وَضَلَّ عَنْهُم مَّا كَانُوا۟ يَدْعُونَ مِن قَبْلُ ۖ
وَظَنُّوا۟ مَا لَهُم مِّن مَّحِيصٍ ﴿٤٨﴾

Man never tires of asking for good [things], but if evil fortune touches him, he abandons all hope, sinking into despair. (49)

لَّا يَسْـَٔمُ ٱلْإِنسَٰنُ مِن دُعَآءِ ٱلْخَيْرِ وَإِن
مَّسَّهُ ٱلشَّرُّ فَيَـُٔوسٌ قَنُوطٌ ﴿٤٩﴾

Yet whenever We let him taste some of Our grace after hardship has befallen him, he is sure to say, 'This is but my due!' and, 'I do not think that the Last Hour will ever come; but even if I were to be taken back to my Lord, the best reward awaits me with Him.' We shall most certainly give the unbelievers a full account of what they did, and We shall most certainly give them a taste of severe suffering. (50)

وَلَئِنْ أَذَقْنَٰهُ رَحْمَةً مِّنَّا مِنۢ بَعْدِ
ضَرَّآءَ مَسَّتْهُ لَيَقُولَنَّ هَٰذَا لِى
وَمَآ أَظُنُّ ٱلسَّاعَةَ قَآئِمَةً وَلَئِن
رُّجِعْتُ إِلَىٰ رَبِّىٓ إِنَّ لِى عِندَهُۥ
لَلْحُسْنَىٰ ۚ فَلَنُنَبِّئَنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟
بِمَا عَمِلُوا۟ وَلَنُذِيقَنَّهُم مِّنْ
عَذَابٍ غَلِيظٍ ﴿٥٠﴾

When we bestow Our blessings on man, he tends to turn aside and stay aloof; but as soon as evil touches him, he turns to prolonged prayer. (51)

وَإِذَآ أَنْعَمْنَا عَلَى ٱلْإِنسَٰنِ أَعْرَضَ
وَنَـَٔا بِجَانِبِهِۦ وَإِذَا مَسَّهُ ٱلشَّرُّ
فَذُو دُعَآءٍ عَرِيضٍ ﴿٥١﴾

Say: 'Have you ever thought if this be truly a revelation from God and yet you deny it? Who could be more astray than one who places himself so far in the wrong?' (52)

قُلْ أَرَءَيْتُمْ إِن كَانَ مِنْ عِندِ ٱللَّهِ
ثُمَّ كَفَرْتُم بِهِۦ مَنْ أَضَلُّ مِمَّنْ هُوَ
فِى شِقَاقٍۭ بَعِيدٍ ﴿٥٢﴾

We shall show them Our signs in the wide horizons [of the universe] and within themselves, so that it will become clear to them that this [revelation] is indeed the truth. Is it not enough that your Lord is witness to everything? (53)

سَنُرِيهِمْ ءَايَٰتِنَا فِى ٱلْءَافَاقِ وَفِىٓ أَنفُسِهِمْ حَتَّىٰ يَتَبَيَّنَ لَهُمْ أَنَّهُ ٱلْحَقُّ ۗ أَوَلَمْ يَكْفِ بِرَبِّكَ أَنَّهُۥ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَىْءٍ شَهِيدٌ ﴿٥٣﴾

They are certainly in doubt as to whether they will meet their Lord. Most certainly, He encompasses everything. (54)

أَلَآ إِنَّهُمْ فِى مِرْيَةٍ مِّن لِّقَآءِ رَبِّهِمْ ۗ أَلَآ إِنَّهُۥ بِكُلِّ شَىْءٍ مُّحِيطٌۢ ﴿٥٤﴾

Overview

This new part of the *sūrah* addresses human hearts. It starts with a round highlighting some of God's signs in the universe, such as the night and day, sun and moon. Some of the idolaters used to prostrate themselves before the sun and the moon alongside God, when they too are no more than His creatures. They are told that if they are too proud to worship God, there are others who worship Him and are closer to Him than they. Indeed the whole earth stands in a position of worship as it receives its life from God, just as they do but who nevertheless do not use this opportunity to move closer to God. On the contrary, they deny God's universal signs as they dispute His Qur'ānic revelations, when the Qur'ān is expressed in clear Arabic, free of any non-Arabic influence. This round then presents before them a scene from the Day of Resurrection and shows them their own reality with all its weakness, changing moods and forgetfulness, eagerness to grab good things, and panicking when it is touched by harm. Nevertheless, they do not try to protect themselves from the harm that God may inflict on them. The *sūrah* ends with a promise from God that He will reveal to them His signs in the universe and within themselves

until they realize that He is the truth, removing all that remains of doubt in their hearts.

Clear Universal Signs

> *Among His signs are the night and the day, and the sun and the moon. Do not prostrate yourselves before the sun or the moon; but prostrate yourselves before God, who has created them, if it is Him you really worship.* (Verse 37)

These signs are there for all to see, and they have a direct effect on the human heart, even though we may not have any scientific information about them. Their relation with man is more profound than scientific knowledge because it is based on the fact that we share with them a common origin, nature and make-up. They belong to us and we belong to them: our constituting elements, nature, law and our Maker who created us all. Therefore, we warm to them and understand the message they impart to us. Therefore, the Qur'ān often directs our attention to them, without delving any deeper. It only wants us not to overlook them as a result of either long familiarity with them or other barriers. The Qur'ān removes these so as to make us alert to and interact with the messages given by this friendly universe.

The verse also points to a particular aspect of deviation. Some people exaggerated the importance of the sun and the moon, and thus deviated from the truth. They worshipped them in the hope of drawing nearer to God through worshipping the most beautiful of His creatures. The Qur'ān puts them back on track, removing their confusion and saying to them that if they want to worship God they must not prostrate themselves before the sun and the moon. Instead, they must prostrate themselves before God who created them. It is the Creator alone whom they, and all creatures, should worship.

If they persist in their arrogance, it will make no difference. Others offer worship to God in all humility: "*If the unbelievers are too arrogant, those who are with your Lord glorify Him night and day and never grow weary of that.*" (Verse 38) The first creatures we think of as being referred to by the expression, '*those who are with your Lord,*' are the angels.

However, there may be other creatures close to God and about whom we know only very little.

Those creatures who are with your Lord are more noble and honourable than humans for they do not show any arrogance like those earth dwellers who have gone astray. Nor do they allow the fact that they are close to God to go to their heads. They do not stop glorifying Him day and night. They never grow weary of this. What is the significance, then, when some people living on earth take a different stand from the rest of all creatures, and refuse to submit themselves to God?

The earth, their mother from which they originate and to which they return, stands humble before God as it receives life from His hand. On the surface of the earth they are no more like ants; and from the earth they derive all their food and drink. This earth, however, presents a different attitude from theirs: "*Another of His signs is this: you see the earth lying desolate, but when We send down rain water upon it, it stirs and swells [with life]. He who brings it to life will surely give life to the dead. He has power over all things.*" (Verse 39)

We need to reflect a little on the precision of the expression used here. In the Arabic original, the word *khāshi'ah*, translated here as 'lying desolate', is used. The term connotes a humble and attentive attitude, but it means here that it is motionless before rain falls on it. When rain is sent upon it, it stirs and swells. It is as if this is a movement expressing gratitude for giving it the means to support life. The context in which this verse occurs is one of attentive worship and humble glorification of God. The earth is mentioned here as one of the figures in the scene, expressing a suitable feeling and making a suitable movement.

We should refer here to one aspect of the Qur'ānic style, comparing word usage:

> The image of how the earth looks before rainfall and the appearance of shoots is used twice in the Qur'ān. In the first instance, the earth is described as *hāmidah* which means 'dry and barren', while in this instance it is described as *khāshi'ah* which means 'lying desolate'. Some people may think that this is mere

variation which writers normally use. It is far more than this. Let us look at the context in which each description is used.

The first description, *hāmidah*, occurs in the following verse: "*Mankind! If you are in doubt as to the resurrection, remember that We have created you out of dust, then out of a gamete, then out of a clinging cell mass, then out of an organized and unorganized embryo, so that We might make things clear to you. We cause to rest in the [mothers'] wombs whatever We please for an appointed term, and then We bring you forth as infants, that you may grow up and attain your prime. Some of you die young, and some live on to abject old age when all that they once knew they know no more. You can see the earth* ***dry and barren****; and [suddenly,] when We send down water upon it, it stirs and swells and puts forth every kind of radiant bloom.*" (22: 5)

Khāshi'ah, has a totally different context: "*Among His signs are the night and the day, and the sun and the moon. Do not prostrate yourselves before the sun or the moon; but prostrate yourselves before God, who has created them, if it is Him you really worship. If the unbelievers are too arrogant, those who are with your Lord glorify Him night and day and never grow weary of that. Another of His signs is this: you see the earth* ***lying desolate****, but when We send down rain water upon it, it stirs and swells [with life].*" (Verses 37–39)

A quick reflection is enough to show how each of these two adjectives fits perfectly in its context. In the first instance, the long verse speaks about creation and resurrection. It is most fitting that the earth should be shown as dry and barren before it stirs and swells, putting forth each blooming and radiant plant. In the second instance, the whole ambiance is one of worship and prostration before God. Hence the description of the earth as desolate, and then when water falls it stirs and swells. We also note that the image of sprouting different plants is not added in the second case because it does not fit in the context of worship. The stirring and swelling in the second case has a different purpose from that in the first case. Here, they merely give an image of the earth's movement after it has lain desolate. Everything in the scene described here is making the movement involved in worship.

> Hence, it does not fit that the earth should remain motionless. It stirs and swells, sharing in the movement of other worshippers. Thus, not a single detail in the scene remains fixed while all others are in motion. This sort of harmony is superior to anything we know of literary expression.[6]

The comment at the end of the verse refers to bringing the dead back to life, citing the earth as an example: "*He who brings it to life will surely give life to the dead. He has power over all things.*" (Verse 39) This image is frequently used in the Qur'ān as an example of how the dead are resurrected on the Day of Judgement. Indeed, the reviving of the earth points to the facts of resurrection and God's limitless power. The image of the earth stirring with life is close to our hearts, touching them before it addresses our minds. Moreover, when life springs in what is dead it gives a subtle feeling of the power behind it. The Qur'ān addresses human nature in its own language, using the shortest way.

How to Describe Unfaith

Against this backdrop of universal signs, the *sūrah* condemns and warns those who deny God's signs and dispute His revelations:

> *Those who distort the meaning of Our revelations are not hidden from Us. Who is in a better state: he who is cast into the fire, or he who shall come safe on Resurrection Day? Do what you will; He sees all that you do.* (Verse 40)

The warning begins in an implicit but fearful way, stating that such people "*are not hidden from Us.*" God is fully aware of them. They will have to account for what they perpetrate, no matter how they try to distort meanings or resort to deception. They may think that they can escape God's punishment in the same way as their deception spared them accountability before human authority. However, the warning is then

6. Quṭb, Sayyid, *Al-Taṣwīr al-Fannī fī al-Qur'ān*, fourth edition, Cairo, (n.d.), pp. 89–100.

stated clearly: "*Who is in a better state: he who is cast into the fire, or he who shall come safe on Resurrection Day?*" (Verse 40) This puts before them the prospect that lies ahead. It is they who will be cast in the fire, in contrast with the believers who will be safe on the Day of Resurrection. The verse concludes with another implicit warning: "*Do what you will; He sees all that you do.*" (Verse 40) Terrible indeed is the fate of the one who is given the freedom to do what he wills and who distorts the meaning of God's revelations when God sees all that he does.

The *sūrah* then speaks about those who specifically deny the Qur'ānic revelations, describing the Qur'ān as a sublime book, admitting no falsehood:

> *Those who reject this reminder [i.e. the Qur'ān] when it comes to them ... It is indeed a sublime book; no falsehood can ever touch it openly or in a stealthy manner. It is bestowed from on high by One who is wise, worthy of praise. Nothing is being said to you other than what was said to the messengers sent before your time. Your Lord is the Lord of forgiveness, but He also inflicts painful punishment. Had We willed to make this revelation a discourse in a non-Arabic tongue, they would have said: 'If only its verses were clearly spelled out! Why [a message in] a non-Arabic tongue and an Arab [messenger]?' Say: 'This is guidance and healing for all those who believe; but as for the unbelievers: there is deafness in their ears, and they are blind to it.' They are, as it were, being called to from too far away.* (Verses 41–44)

The *sūrah* refers to those who reject the Qur'ān when it comes to them, but does not mention their status or what will happen to them. The sentence is left without a predicate: "*Those who reject this reminder [i.e. the Qur'ān] when it comes to them ...*" It is a case of saying that such people do something so horrible that it cannot be properly described. The *sūrah* simply mentions them and moves on to describe the reminder which they reject; thus showing their action in its true and ghastly colours: "*It is indeed a sublime book; no falsehood can ever touch it openly or in a stealthy manner. It is bestowed from on high by One who is wise, worthy of praise.*" (Verses 41–42)

How could falsehood touch or creep into this book when it comes from God who is the truth absolute? It is a book which clearly presents the word of truth, one that is permanently linked to the truth that ensures the proper conduct of the affairs of the universe. How could falsehood come into it when it is a sublime book, given protection by God who undertakes to keep it intact: "*It is We Ourselves who have bestowed this reminder from on high, and it is We who shall preserve it intact.*" (15: 9)

Anyone who looks carefully at the Qur'ān will find in it the truth it has come to establish. We find this truth in its spirit and its text: it is simple, natural, reassuring, and addresses human nature in its totality with profound effect. Moreover, "*it is bestowed from on high by One who is wise, worthy of praise.*" (Verse 42) Wisdom is clearly apparent in its structure, directives, the way it was revealed, and in its direct address to the human heart. God who revealed the Qur'ān is worthy of praise. There is in the Qur'ān much that makes our hearts eager to express its praise of God.

The *sūrah* then establishes a bond between the Qur'ān and earlier revelations, and between the Prophet Muḥammad, (peace be upon him), and all messengers sent before his time. Thus, all prophets belong to one family which receives the same discourse from God. Their hearts and souls look up to Him as they pursue their course advocating His message. Thus, the last in this family, the Prophet of Islam, feels that he is a branch of a great tree with deep roots, a member of a great family that goes back to the beginnings of history.

"*Nothing is being said to you other than what was said to the messengers sent before your time. Your Lord is the Lord of forgiveness, but He also inflicts painful punishment.*" (Verse 43) It is all one message and one faith. Likewise, it is received in the same way: the same rejection and the same objections. Yet it establishes one bond, making one family which endures the same experience and feels the same pain. Ultimately, it follows the same way, leading to the same goal.

How comforting this fact is to advocates of the Divine message. It strengthens their resolve to continue along the same way that was traversed before them by God's noble messengers, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muḥammad and the others, (peace be upon them all). How honoured and confident the advocates of God's message feel

knowing that they follow in the footsteps of such a select group. Such a feeling motivates them to go along, caring little for the difficulties and hardships they meet on the way.

It is certainly true: "*Nothing is being said to you other than what was said to the messengers sent before your time.*" (Verse 43) The impact this fact can have when it becomes firmly established in the minds of believers is truly profound.

Included in what was said to God's messengers, and to Muḥammad (peace be upon him), the last among them, was: "*Your Lord is the Lord of forgiveness, but He also inflicts painful punishment.*" (Verse 43) Thus balance is emphasized. A believer then hopes for God's grace and forgiveness, never despairing that these will be bestowed on him by God's will, but always fearing to incur God's punishment. Striking the right balance is an essential characteristic of Islam.

The *sūrah* then reminds the Arabs of God's blessing by making Arabic the language of the Qur'ān. At the same time, it refers to their contentious disputes and rejection. "*Had We willed to make this revelation a discourse in a non-Arabic tongue, they would have said: 'If only its verses were clearly spelled out! Why [a message in] a non-Arabic tongue and an Arab [messenger]?'*" (Verse 44) They do not listen to it in its Arabic form. In fact, they feared it because it addressed their Arab nature in their own language. Hence, they urged each other to adopt this strategy: "*Do not listen to this Qur'ān, but drown it in frivolous talk, so that you may gain the upper hand.*" (Verse 26) Had God expressed His message in a different tongue, they would still have objected to it, calling for it to be put clearly in Arabic. They would object even if part of it were in Arabic and the other part in a different language. Their notion, therefore, was to argue in all cases and all situations.

The truth that emerges from this argument about the form given to the message is that this book provides guidance and healing to believers. Believers' hearts appreciate its nature and truth, receive its guidance and benefit from its healing. Those who do not believe remain in confusion, and their hearts do not feel the cheerfulness of its message. Hence, it becomes like deafness to their ears and blindness in their eyes. They recognize nothing, because they are far removed from the

nature of this book and its address: "*Say: This is guidance and healing for all those who believe; but as for the unbelievers: there is deafness in their ears, and they are blind to it. They are, as it were, being called to from too far away.*" (Verse 44)

We feel the truth of this statement in every community and generation. Some people are profoundly affected by the Qur'ān. It transforms them, giving them a different type of life, and enables them to achieve miracles within themselves and in their environment. Others feel this Qur'ān too heavy for their hearts and ears. When they listen to it, they only grow more deaf and blind. The Qur'ān never changes; it is hearts that are different.

A reference follows to Moses and his book, and how his people differed in their attitude to the Qur'ān. God has deferred His judgement on their disputes. He has decreed that judgement on all this will be given on the Day of Judgement: "*We gave the Book to Moses but disputes arose about it. Had it not been for a decree that had already been issued by your Lord, all would have been decided between them. As it is, they are in grave, disquieting doubt about it.*" (Verse 45) Likewise, He has decreed that judgement on the question of His final message will be similarly deferred. He thus lets people do as they like, and they will ultimately receive what their action merits: "*Whoever does what is right does so for his own good; and whoever does evil will himself bear its consequences. Your Lord is never unjust to His creatures.*" (Verse 46)

This message proclaims that mankind have attained maturity. This makes man responsible for his choices. Such responsibility is based on individual accountability. Therefore, each one is free to choose, knowing that "*your Lord is never unjust to His creatures.*"

Man's Vacillating Attitude

As judgement is deferred to the Day of Judgement, the *sūrah* makes clear that knowledge of its timing belongs to God alone. God's knowledge is described by highlighting some of its aspects in an inspiring way. This serves as a prelude to a scene from the Day of Judgement when unbelievers are questioned, and their answers are reported:

> *Knowledge of the Last Hour belongs to Him alone. No fruit comes out of its calyx and no female ever conceives or gives birth, without His knowledge. And so, on the Day when He shall call out to them, 'Where now are those alleged partners of Mine?' They will say, 'We confess to You that none of us can vouch for them.'* (Verse 47)

The timing of the Last Hour signalling the Day of Judgement is beyond anyone's ken; the fruit in its calyx is something that cannot be seen; and what a pregnant female is bearing is similarly concealed. Yet they are all within God's knowledge. Our mind looks far and wide, trying to think of the fruits when they are still in calyxes and embryos in their wombs. Who can think of their count, let alone what they actually are. An image is thus drawn of the extent of God's knowledge, to the extent our mental capacity allows. Yet His knowledge extends far beyond this, as it is without limit.

Our mind then imagines those who have gone astray, as they stand before God, realizing that His knowledge encompasses everything, no matter how well concealed it is. They face the questioning: "*On the Day when He shall call out to them, 'Where now are those alleged partners of Mine?'*" On that day, no argument is of any use. No one can utter anything but the truth. What will they say then: "*They will say, 'We confess to You that none of us can vouch for them.'*" (Verse 47) They will declare that none of them will then claim any partners to God.

"*Whatever they used to invoke before will have forsaken them; and they will know that there is no escape for them.*" (Verse 48) They will know nothing of their previous claims. They will realize that there is no escape from their fate. They will forget their past and think only of their present situation.

Such is the day about which they take no precautions despite the fact that man is eager to achieve every good thing and fears what brings him harm. At this point, the *sūrah* shows them their naked reality, without cover or disguise:

> *Man never tires of asking for good [things], but if evil fortune touches him, he abandons all hope, sinking into despair. Yet whenever We let him taste some of Our grace after hardship has*

befallen him, he is sure to say, 'This is but my due!' and, 'I do not think that the Last Hour will ever come; but even if I were to be taken back to my Lord, the best reward awaits me with Him.' We shall most certainly give the unbelievers a full account of what they did, and We shall most certainly give them a taste of severe suffering. When we bestow Our blessings on man, he tends to turn aside and stay aloof; but as soon as evil touches him, he turns to prolonged prayer. (Verses 49–51)

Man is so insistent in his requests, urging and repeating, appealing for what he feels to be good for him. Indeed, he never tires of this. Yet should misfortune befall him, even in the slightest way, he loses hope and sinks into despair. He feels his burden too heavy, thinks that God's grace has abandoned him. All this comes about because his relationship with God is not strong enough in his heart.

Yet should God grant him something of His grace after he has suffered some harm, he will be so elated that he will forget how this grace was given to him, and he will not give due thanks. On the contrary, he will consider that he has deserved this grace and that he should have it forever. He will even dismiss the Day of Judgement thinking that it will never come: "*I do not think that the Last Hour will ever come.*" (Verse 50) He will boast of his own position, thinking that he deserves favouritism with God. He will even go further than this, denying the Day of Judgement and, thus, disbelieving in God. Nevertheless, he thinks that should he be returned to God, he will have a secure position with Him: "*Even if I were to be taken back to my Lord, the best reward awaits me with Him.*" (Verse 50) This betrays no small degree of arrogance. Here the *sūrah* issues a suitable warning to those who are so arrogant: "*We shall most certainly give the unbelievers a full account of what they did, and We shall most certainly give them a taste of severe suffering.*" (Verse 50)

Man is always moving to extremes. If God bestows His grace on him, he blows his own trumpet and behaves with arrogance. When harm or misfortune befalls him, he sinks low and collapses. He will pray insistently, prolonging his prayer. How accurate this description of man's inner thoughts is! No wonder; it is a description by God who

created man and knows the subtle workings of his mind. He knows that man will continue to follow round and circular ways, unless he is guided to the right path.

Now that they face their own naked reality, the question is put to them about what they would do if it is proven that the message they deny is actually God's own message? Are they really prepared to expose themselves to the consequences of such rejection: "*Say: 'Have you ever thought if this be truly a revelation from God and yet you deny it? Who could be more astray than one who places himself so far in the wrong?'*" (Verse 52) It is a possibility to be reckoned with. Have they taken any steps to deal with this should it come true?

Signs Galore

They are left to think and consider. The *sūrah* now turns to the open universe, revealing some of the signs placed in it, as well as some of what is within their own selves:

> *We shall show them Our signs in the wide horizons [of the universe] and within themselves, so that it will become clear to them that this [revelation] is indeed the truth. Is it not enough that your Lord is witness to everything? They are certainly in doubt as to whether they will meet their Lord. Most certainly, He encompasses everything.* (Verses 53–54)

This is the final note in the *sūrah*, and it is a profound one. It is a promise by God to mankind to put before them some of the secrets in the universe and some of the secrets working within themselves. These are His signs. They will thus be able to realize that this faith, this book and its discourse are the truth. Indeed it is, for it is all from God, and whose word is truer than God's? And God's promise has certainly come true. Over the fourteen centuries that followed this promise He has made many of His signs in the universe and within man known to us, and He continues to show us more of these every day.

When we look around us we see that man has discovered much since then. Wide horizons have opened before us, as well as much of

what was unknown about man. If people would only reflect on how they came to know these and show gratitude for this, they would have ensured great benefit. They now know that the earth, which people used to imagine as the centre of the universe, is no more than a small satellite of the sun, and that the sun is merely a small circle of which the universe contains millions and millions. They also know the nature of their earth and sun, as well as the nature of the universe, if their modern information is true.

People now know much about the matter of which the universe is made, if it is true that it is made of matter. They know that the atom is the basic unit of which the universe is made, and that the atom can be transformed into radiation. They thus know that the whole universe is made of radiation that takes many different forms, making a great variety of shapes and sizes. We have also come to know much about our planet, learning that it is round in shape, like a circle or close to a circle, and that it rotates on its axis and moves in orbit around the sun. We have learnt about all its continents, oceans and rivers, and discovered what was previously unknown to us of what is below its surface. Moreover, we now know much of the provisions placed inside it and in its atmosphere.

Man has also learnt much about the laws that link his planet with the great universe and which operate within the universe as a whole conducting its affairs. Some people have gone further, moving from knowledge of these laws to knowledge of the One who created them. Others have remained stationary, looking at what has become known without moving forward. Although scientific advancement led mankind first to go astray, it has begun now to return, through scientific advancement, realizing that God is the truth absolute.

New knowledge about man is in no way less spectacular than that about the universe. We have learnt much about the human body: its characteristics, make-up, physiology, the food it needs and what it makes of it, the illnesses affecting it, how the body works and the functions of its different organs. These discoveries put before us real miracles that can only be the work of God. We have also learnt something about the human soul. Our new knowledge does not compare with what we learnt about the human body, because our study

and research have concentrated far more on the physical rather than the mental and spiritual in man's life. Yet what we have learnt so far heralds great discoveries in this field as well.[7]

Yet man has not reached the end of the road. God's promise remains true and valid: "*We shall show them Our signs in the wide horizons [of the universe] and within themselves, so that it will become clear to them that this [revelation] is indeed the truth.*" (Verse 53) Early signs of the fulfilment of the last part of this promise have come to be noticed since the early years of the twentieth century. People are flocking from different parts of the world to join the camp of faith. Many are coming forward through material science. Numerous others are coming from far away, despite the great tide of atheism that almost drowned the earth in the past. This tide of atheism is now on the retreat, although to all appearances it seems still to be rising. By the close of this twentieth century it may almost have disappeared, by God's will.[8] For, God's promise will certainly come true: "*Is it not enough that your Lord is witness to everything?*" (Verse 53) It is He who has made this promise, and it is He who knows the truth and is witness to it.

"*They are certainly in doubt as to whether they will meet their Lord.*" (Verse 54) It is because of their doubt that they will meet their Lord that people continue to perpetrate what they do. Yet the promise is true, no doubt. "*Most certainly, He encompasses everything.*" (Verse 54) How can they escape meeting Him when He encompasses all?

7. The author wrote this nearly 50 years ago, and his prediction has come true. Research in mental health has made great advancements, but scientists in this field assure us that we are still at the beginning and there are bound to be more spectacular discoveries. – Editor's note.

8. The author here was over optimistic, but it is such optimism and trust in the fulfilment of God's promise that continues to motivate advocates of the Divine faith despite the great obstacles in their way. – Editor's note.

SŪRAH 42

Al-Shūrā

(Consultation)

Prologue

Like all the *sūrahs* revealed in Makkah, this *sūrah* deals with the issue of faith, but it especially focuses on the question of revelation and the Divine message. It can truly be said that this question provides the central theme of the *sūrah* and that all points discussed in it serve this purpose.

Yet the *sūrah* also expands on the truth of God's oneness, presenting it from different angles. It also speaks of the truth of resurrection and the need to believe in it. The life to come is mentioned in several places with different images of it presented. The *sūrah* also outlines some of the believers' qualities and the good manners characterizing their behaviour. It also mentions man's provisions and how they are given in plenty or in scant measure. Furthermore, it speaks about man and his two states when he enjoys happiness or suffers hardship.

Nevertheless, the question of revelation and the Divine message provides the basic truth the *sūrah* expounds upon, giving it its general ambiance. It is as if all the points and ideas discussed in the *sūrah* are meant to emphasize this truth and drive it home.

The line the *sūrah* takes in presenting this truth and its associated topics requires further discussion. It is presented in different ways, each separated from the other with a few verses that speak about God's

oneness through showing that the Creator, or the Provider, or who controls hearts, or determines all creatures' fates is the One God. As the *sūrah* tackles its main theme of revelation and message, it emphasizes that the source of all revelation is one, as also are the message, the faith, the code of living and the line to be followed. Similarly, the leadership of humanity under the banner of faith is one. Thus the theme of oneness, with all its meanings and connotations, is brought into sharp relief throughout the *sūrah*, whatever topic it may be discussing. We will now briefly refer to some such examples:

The *sūrah* begins with five separate letters: "*Ḥā. Mīm. 'Ayn. Sīn. Qāf.*" These are immediately followed by the statement: "*Thus has God, the Almighty, the Wise, sent revelation to you, Prophet, and to those who preceded you.*" (Verse 3) It, thus, begins by stating that all revelations, throughout all generations, come from the same source. Further attributes of God are added in the next verse: "*His is all that is in the heavens and the earth. He is the Most High, the Supreme One.*" (Verse 4) These attributes highlight the fact that the heavens and the earth belong to one owner, and that He is the Supreme One.

The *sūrah* then takes another line, describing how the universe stands with regard to the question of belief in the One Owner, and to the deviation leading some people to associate partners with Him: "*The heavens are well-nigh rent asunder from above as the angels extol their Lord's limitless glory and praise, and beg forgiveness for all who are on earth. Surely God is Much-Forgiving, Ever Merciful. As for those who take for their protectors beings other than Him, God watches them, and you are not responsible for them.*" (Verses 5–6) We thus see the whole universe preoccupied with the question of faith and unbelief to the extent that the heavens are about to be rent asunder because of the deviation by some earth dwellers. For their part, the angels pray for the forgiveness of all those on earth specifically because of the grave offence perpetrated by some of them.

The *sūrah* then returns to its main theme: "*So We have revealed to you a discourse in the Arabic tongue in order that you may warn the Mother City and all who dwell around it; that you may forewarn them of the Day of the Gathering, of which there is no doubt, when some shall*

be in paradise and some in the blazing fire." (Verse 7) It moves on with the two groups and their different abodes to state that God could have made them all one community. However, His will has decreed on the basis of His knowledge and wisdom that some are admitted to His grace, "*whereas the wrongdoers will have no one to protect them and no one to support them.*" (Verse 8) It further states that God is the Protector of all, and that "*He is the One who gives life to the dead; and He has power over all things.*" (Verse 9)

Again the *sūrah* returns to the central theme of the truth of revelation and message, stating that judgement on all matters that are subject to dispute between people belongs to God who has revealed the Qur'ān to which people must refer in all situations: "*Whatever the subject of your disputes, the final word belongs to God. Such is God, my Lord. In Him have I placed my trust, and to Him do I always turn.*" (Verse 10) It then proceeds from God's Lordship to His being the One Creator who alone administers everything in the universe, determines provisions and knows all: "*He is the Originator of the heavens and the earth. He made mates for you from among yourselves, just as He made mates for animals, so that you will multiply. Nothing bears even the slightest comparability to Him. He alone hears all and sees all. His are the keys of the heavens and the earth. He gives abundant sustenance, or gives it in scant measure to whomever He wills. He has full knowledge of everything.*" (Verses 11–12)

Having made these points, the *sūrah* immediately returns to its central theme: "*In matters of faith, He has ordained for you the same as He had enjoined on Noah – that which We have revealed to you [Muḥammad] – and as We enjoined on Abraham, Moses and Jesus: 'Steadfastly uphold the faith and do not divide into factions.' Hard for the idolaters is that which you call on them to accept. God draws to Himself whoever He pleases and guides to Himself everyone who turns to Him. They became divided, out of selfish rivalry, only after the knowledge had reached them. Had it not been for a decree that had already been issued by your Lord, until a term set [by Him], all would have been decided between them. As it is, those after them, who inherited the Divine book, are in grave, disquieting doubt about it. Therefore, call people to that faith, and follow the straight path as you have been*

commanded. Do not follow their likes and dislikes, but say: 'I believe in whatever revelation God has bestowed from on high..." (Verses 13–15)

The *sūrah* follows this pattern in presenting the truth of revelation and message, maintaining this ambiance while turning to address other issues of faith which, in turn, endorse that truth. This pattern is abundantly clear in the first part of the *sūrah*, up to and including verse 24, in which the theme of revelation and message is encountered time after time.

The second part, taking up the rest of the *sūrah*, begins with a discussion of God's signs that are seen in the way He gives some people abundant provision while others receive small measure, how He sends rainfall, the creation of the heavens and the earth with all creatures therein, and ships that traverse the sea. It then moves on to outline the basic quality that distinguishes believers and their community. This is followed by an image of the Day of Judgement showing the wrongdoers as they face their punishment: "*you will see them exclaiming, 'Is there any way of return?' You shall see them brought before the fire, disgraced and humiliated, looking with a furtive glance.*" (Verses 44–45) By contrast, the believers will be in a dignified position, stating the fate that the wrongdoers face: "*The believers will then say: 'The true losers are the ones who have forfeited themselves and their kindred on this Day of Resurrection.' Indeed the wrongdoers will fall into long-lasting suffering.*" (Verse 45) Against this backdrop, the *sūrah* calls on people to spare themselves such an end before it is too late: "*Respond to your Lord before there comes, by God's will, a day that cannot be put off. There shall be no refuge for you on that day, nor shall you be able to deny your sins.*" (Verse 47) Then the *sūrah* reverts to its central theme, the truth of revelation and message, highlighting one of its many aspects: "*If they turn away, We have not sent you to be their keeper. Your only duty is to deliver the message [entrusted to you].*" (Verse 48)

The *sūrah* continues to refer to its central theme, directly and indirectly, up to its end and moves after each reference to address other ideas relating to it. Its conclusion provides the following statement regarding revelation and message: "*Thus have We revealed a spirit to you [Muḥammad] by Our command. You knew neither revelation nor faith, but We made it a light, guiding with it whoever We will of Our*

servants. You most certainly give guidance to the straight path, the path of God, to whom belongs all that is in the heavens and earth. Most certainly, to God all things shall in the end return." (Verses 52–53)

One of the clear objectives of the *sūrah* emerges from the way it tackles its central theme and how it proceeds, time after time, to refer to related issues. This objective is nothing less than to appoint a new leadership for the advocates of Divine faith. This new leadership is in fact this final message, the messenger delivering it and the Muslim community that follows the straight course defined by God. The first reference to this objective is made at the outset: "*Thus has God, the Almighty, the Wise, sent revelation to you, Prophet, and to those who preceded you.*" (Verse 3) It thus makes it clear that it is God who reveals all messages to all messengers. This final message is a clear progression of something that has long been established.

The second reference follows shortly after that to establish the centre of the new leadership to which reference will be later made: "*So We have revealed to you a discourse in the Arabic tongue in order that you may warn the Mother City and all who dwell around it.*" (Verse 7) The third reference states the unity of the message whereas the first reference identified the unity of its source: "*In matters of faith, He has ordained for you the same as He had enjoined on Noah – that which We have revealed to you [Muḥammad] – and as We enjoined on Abraham, Moses and Jesus: Steadfastly uphold the faith and do not divide into factions.*" (Verse 13) In this third reference, the *sūrah* clearly states that division occurred because people disobeyed God's injunction. This did not come about as a result of any ignorance on the part of the followers of those noble messengers; they had the knowledge to spare them such division. It simply occurred as a result of injustice and envy: "*They became divided, out of selfish rivalry, only after the knowledge had reached them.*" (Verse 14) The *sūrah* then moves on to describe the conditions of those who came after the generations that differed: "*As it is, those after them, who inherited the Divine book, are in grave, disquieting doubt about it.*" (Verse 14)

At this point it becomes abundantly clear that humanity had sunk into a state of confusion and doubt. It no longer had a wise leadership following a well-defined code. The Divine message that assumes the

leadership of humanity suffered from the division that took place between its followers, while succeeding generations viewed it with profound suspicion, thereby precluding the emergence of wise leadership. The *sūrah* therefore declares that this final message and the messenger delivering it are to assume the role of leadership: "*Therefore, call people to that faith, and follow the straight path as you have been commanded. Do not follow their likes and dislikes, but say: 'I believe in whatever revelation God has bestowed from on high. I am commanded to ensure justice between you. God is our Lord and your Lord.*" (Verse 15) Thus the detailed description of the Muslim community, which occurs in the second part of the *sūrah*, comes as a natural progression, because it is this community that will assume the leadership of humanity.

I

A Message Revealed by God

Al-Shūrā (Consultation)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

Ḥā. Mīm. (1)

'Ayn. Sīn. Qāf. (2)

Thus has God, the Almighty, the Wise, sent revelation to you, Prophet, and to those who preceded you. (3)

His is all that is in the heavens and the earth. He is the Most High, the Supreme One. (4)

The heavens are well-nigh rent asunder from above as the angels extol their Lord's limitless glory

and praise, and beg forgiveness for all who are on earth. Surely God is Much-Forgiving, Ever Merciful. (5)

بِحَمْدِ رَبِّهِمْ وَيَسْتَغْفِرُونَ لِمَن فِي ٱلْأَرْضِ ۗ أَلَآ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ هُوَ ٱلْغَفُورُ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ٥

As for those who take for their protectors beings other than Him, God watches them, and you are not responsible for them. (6)

وَٱلَّذِينَ ٱتَّخَذُوا۟ مِن دُونِهِۦٓ أَوْلِيَآءَ ٱللَّهُ حَفِيظٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَمَآ أَنتَ عَلَيْهِم بِوَكِيلٍ ٦

So We have revealed to you a discourse in the Arabic tongue in order that you may warn the Mother City and all who dwell around it; that you may forewarn them of the Day of the Gathering, of which there is no doubt, when some shall be in paradise and some in the blazing fire. (7)

وَكَذَٰلِكَ أَوْحَيْنَآ إِلَيْكَ قُرْءَانًا عَرَبِيًّا لِّتُنذِرَ أُمَّ ٱلْقُرَىٰ وَمَنْ حَوْلَهَا وَتُنذِرَ يَوْمَ ٱلْجَمْعِ لَا رَيْبَ فِيهِ ۚ فَرِيقٌ فِى ٱلْجَنَّةِ وَفَرِيقٌ فِى ٱلسَّعِيرِ ٧

Had God so willed, He could have made them all one single community, but He admits to His grace whoever He will, whereas the wrongdoers will have no one to protect them and no one to support them. (8)

وَلَوْ شَآءَ ٱللَّهُ لَجَعَلَهُمْ أُمَّةً وَٰحِدَةً وَلَٰكِن يُدْخِلُ مَن يَشَآءُ فِى رَحْمَتِهِۦ ۚ وَٱلظَّٰلِمُونَ مَا لَهُم مِّن وَلِىٍّ وَلَا نَصِيرٍ ٨

Have they chosen protectors other than Him? God alone is the Protector of all; He is the One who gives life to the dead; and He has power over all things. (9)

أَمِ ٱتَّخَذُوا۟ مِن دُونِهِۦٓ أَوْلِيَآءَ ۖ فَٱللَّهُ هُوَ ٱلْوَلِىُّ وَهُوَ يُحْىِ ٱلْمَوْتَىٰ وَهُوَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَىْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ٩

Whatever the subject of your disputes, the final word belongs to God. Such is God, my Lord. In Him have I placed my trust, and to Him do I always turn. (10)

وَمَا ٱخْتَلَفْتُمْ فِيهِ مِن شَىْءٍ فَحُكْمُهُۥٓ إِلَى ٱللَّهِ ۚ ذَٰلِكُمُ ٱللَّهُ رَبِّى عَلَيْهِ تَوَكَّلْتُ وَإِلَيْهِ أُنِيبُ ﴿١٠﴾

He is the Originator of the heavens and the earth. He made mates for you from among yourselves, just as He made mates for animals, so that you will multiply. Nothing bears even the slightest comparability to Him. He alone hears all and sees all. (11)

فَاطِرُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ ۚ جَعَلَ لَكُم مِّنْ أَنفُسِكُمْ أَزْوَٰجًا وَمِنَ ٱلْأَنْعَٰمِ أَزْوَٰجًا ۖ يَذْرَؤُكُمْ فِيهِ ۚ لَيْسَ كَمِثْلِهِۦ شَىْءٌ ۖ وَهُوَ ٱلسَّمِيعُ ٱلْبَصِيرُ ﴿١١﴾

His are the keys of the heavens and the earth. He gives abundant sustenance, or gives it in scant measure to whomever He wills. He has full knowledge of everything. (12)

لَهُۥ مَقَالِيدُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ ۖ يَبْسُطُ ٱلرِّزْقَ لِمَن يَشَآءُ وَيَقْدِرُ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ بِكُلِّ شَىْءٍ عَلِيمٌ ﴿١٢﴾

In matters of faith, He has ordained for you the same as He had enjoined on Noah – that which We have revealed to you [Muḥammad] – and as We enjoined on Abraham, Moses and Jesus: 'Steadfastly uphold the faith and do not divide into factions.' Hard for the idolaters is that which you call on them to accept. God draws to Himself whoever He pleases and guides to Himself everyone who turns to Him. (13)

شَرَعَ لَكُم مِّنَ ٱلدِّينِ مَا وَصَّىٰ بِهِۦ نُوحًا وَٱلَّذِىٓ أَوْحَيْنَآ إِلَيْكَ وَمَا وَصَّيْنَا بِهِۦٓ إِبْرَٰهِيمَ وَمُوسَىٰ وَعِيسَىٰٓ ۖ أَنْ أَقِيمُوا۟ ٱلدِّينَ وَلَا تَتَفَرَّقُوا۟ فِيهِ ۚ كَبُرَ عَلَى ٱلْمُشْرِكِينَ مَا تَدْعُوهُمْ إِلَيْهِ ۚ ٱللَّهُ يَجْتَبِىٓ إِلَيْهِ مَن يَشَآءُ وَيَهْدِىٓ إِلَيْهِ مَن يُنِيبُ ﴿١٣﴾

وَمَا تَفَرَّقُوٓا إِلَّا مِنۢ بَعْدِ مَا جَآءَهُمُ ٱلْعِلْمُ بَغْيًۢا بَيْنَهُمْ ۚ وَلَوْلَا كَلِمَةٌ سَبَقَتْ مِن رَّبِّكَ إِلَىٰٓ أَجَلٍ مُّسَمًّى لَّقُضِىَ بَيْنَهُمْ ۚ وَإِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ أُورِثُوا ٱلْكِتَٰبَ مِنۢ بَعْدِهِمْ لَفِى شَكٍّ مِّنْهُ مُرِيبٍ ﴿١٤﴾

They became divided, out of selfish rivalry, only after the knowledge had reached them. Had it not been for a decree that had already been issued by your Lord, until a term set [by Him], all would have been decided between them. As it is, those after them, who inherited the Divine book, are in grave, disquieting doubt about it. (14)

فَلِذَٰلِكَ فَٱدْعُ ۖ وَٱسْتَقِمْ كَمَآ أُمِرْتَ ۖ وَلَا تَتَّبِعْ أَهْوَآءَهُمْ ۖ وَقُلْ ءَامَنتُ بِمَآ أَنزَلَ ٱللَّهُ مِن كِتَٰبٍ ۖ وَأُمِرْتُ لِأَعْدِلَ بَيْنَكُمُ ۖ ٱللَّهُ رَبُّنَا وَرَبُّكُمْ ۖ لَنَآ أَعْمَٰلُنَا وَلَكُمْ أَعْمَٰلُكُمْ ۖ لَا حُجَّةَ بَيْنَنَا وَبَيْنَكُمُ ۖ ٱللَّهُ يَجْمَعُ بَيْنَنَا ۖ وَإِلَيْهِ ٱلْمَصِيرُ ﴿١٥﴾

Therefore, call people to that faith, and follow the straight path as you have been commanded. Do not follow their likes and dislikes, but say: 'I believe in whatever revelation God has bestowed from on high. I am commanded to ensure justice between you. God is our Lord and your Lord. To us shall be accounted our deeds, and to you, your deeds. Let there be no argument between us and you. God will bring us all together, and to Him we shall all return.' (15)

وَٱلَّذِينَ يُحَآجُّونَ فِى ٱللَّهِ مِنۢ بَعْدِ مَا ٱسْتُجِيبَ لَهُۥ حُجَّتُهُمْ دَاحِضَةٌ عِندَ رَبِّهِمْ وَعَلَيْهِمْ غَضَبٌ وَلَهُمْ عَذَابٌ شَدِيدٌ ﴿١٦﴾

As for those who argue about God after He has been acknowledged, their argument is null and void in their Lord's sight: anger will fall upon them and severe suffering awaits them. (16)

It is God who has bestowed revelation from on high, setting forth the truth, and established the balance. For all you know, the Last Hour may well be near. (17)

ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِىٓ أَنزَلَ ٱلْكِتَٰبَ بِٱلْحَقِّ وَٱلْمِيزَانَ ۗ وَمَا يُدْرِيكَ لَعَلَّ ٱلسَّاعَةَ قَرِيبٌ ﴿١٧﴾

Those who do not believe in it seek to hasten it, whereas the believers stand in awe of it and know it to be the truth. Those who argue about the Last Hour have gone far astray. (18)

يَسْتَعْجِلُ بِهَا ٱلَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ بِهَا ۖ وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ مُشْفِقُونَ مِنْهَا وَيَعْلَمُونَ أَنَّهَا ٱلْحَقُّ ۗ أَلَآ إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ يُمَارُونَ فِى ٱلسَّاعَةِ لَفِى ضَلَٰلٍۭ بَعِيدٍ ﴿١٨﴾

God is most kind towards His creatures. He provides for whoever He will. He is the Powerful, the Almighty. (19)

ٱللَّهُ لَطِيفٌۢ بِعِبَادِهِۦ يَرْزُقُ مَن يَشَآءُ ۖ وَهُوَ ٱلْقَوِىُّ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ﴿١٩﴾

To anyone who desires a harvest in the life to come, We shall grant an increase in his harvest; whereas to the one who desires a harvest in this world, We shall give a share of it, but he will have no share in the life to come. (20)

مَن كَانَ يُرِيدُ حَرْثَ ٱلْءَاخِرَةِ نَزِدْ لَهُۥ فِى حَرْثِهِۦ ۖ وَمَن كَانَ يُرِيدُ حَرْثَ ٱلدُّنْيَا نُؤْتِهِۦ مِنْهَا وَمَا لَهُۥ فِى ٱلْءَاخِرَةِ مِن نَّصِيبٍ ﴿٢٠﴾

Do they believe in alleged partners [of God] who ordain for them things which God has not sanctioned? Were it not for God's decree on the final judgement, all would have been decided between them. Painful suffering awaits the wrongdoers. (21)

أَمْ لَهُمْ شُرَكَٰٓؤُا۟ شَرَعُوا۟ لَهُم مِّنَ ٱلدِّينِ مَا لَمْ يَأْذَنۢ بِهِ ٱللَّهُ ۚ وَلَوْلَا كَلِمَةُ ٱلْفَصْلِ لَقُضِىَ بَيْنَهُمْ ۗ وَإِنَّ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ﴿٢١﴾

تَرَى الظَّالِمِينَ مُشْفِقِينَ مِمَّا كَسَبُوا وَهُوَ وَاقِعٌ بِهِمْ ۗ وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ فِي رَوْضَاتِ الْجَنَّاتِ ۖ لَهُم مَّا يَشَاءُونَ عِندَ رَبِّهِمْ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ هُوَ الْفَضْلُ الْكَبِيرُ ﴿٢٢﴾

You will see the wrongdoers full of fear on account of what they have done, which is bound to fall back on them. And you will see those who believe and do righteous deeds in the flowering meadows of the gardens of paradise. They will have whatever they wish from their Lord. This is indeed the supreme bounty. (22)

ذَٰلِكَ الَّذِي يُبَشِّرُ اللَّهُ عِبَادَهُ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ ۗ قُل لَّا أَسْأَلُكُمْ عَلَيْهِ أَجْرًا إِلَّا الْمَوَدَّةَ فِي الْقُرْبَىٰ ۗ وَمَن يَقْتَرِفْ حَسَنَةً نَّزِدْ لَهُ فِيهَا حُسْنًا ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ غَفُورٌ شَكُورٌ ﴿٢٣﴾

It is of this [bounty] that God gives good news to His servants who believe and do righteous deeds. Say: 'No reward do I ask of you for this. It is only an act of affection due to kin.' Whoever does good, We shall increase it for him. God is Most-Forgiving, Most-Appreciative. (23)

أَمْ يَقُولُونَ افْتَرَىٰ عَلَى اللَّهِ كَذِبًا ۖ فَإِن يَشَإِ اللَّهُ يَخْتِمْ عَلَىٰ قَلْبِكَ ۗ وَيَمْحُ اللَّهُ الْبَاطِلَ وَيُحِقُّ الْحَقَّ بِكَلِمَاتِهِ ۚ إِنَّهُ عَلِيمٌ بِذَاتِ الصُّدُورِ ﴿٢٤﴾

Do they say, 'He has invented a lie about God?' If God so willed, He could seal your heart and blot out all falsehood, and establish the truth by His words. He has full knowledge of what is in people's hearts. (24)

Angels Praying for Mankind

We talked previously about the separate letters that begin several *sūrahs*. Here we have five of these, followed by the verse saying: "*Thus has God, the Almighty, the Wise, sent revelation to you, Prophet, and to those who preceded you.*" (Verse 3) Thus, in this way and following this pattern, God sent down His revelations to you and to messengers before you. It is made of words and phrases composed of those letters known to man. People know these words and phrases and grasp their meanings, but they cannot compose anything like it out of the letters they know so well.

At the same time, the unity of revelation is established. This comes from the same source as it is revealed by God, the Almighty, the Wise. Those who receive it are the messengers He sent across different generations. The message revealed is essentially the same, despite the fact that it was given to different recipients at different times. Thus we see the Divine message as a story beginning far back in ancient times, having numerous intertwined episodes, and following the same principles, like a mature tree graced with a large number of branches and firm, deep roots.

When this fact is well established in believers' hearts, they feel that their faith is well-founded, stable and authoritative. They are, thus, strongly attracted to the source of this revelation, who is 'God, the Almighty, the Wise.' They also value the bond between them and the believers who followed such revelations throughout all generations, since the family of believers goes far back in history, and they all turn ultimately to God. How can they abandon the straight path of the Divine message to take other, divergent ways that have unclear beginnings and lead nowhere?

The *sūrah* then adds other attributes belonging to God: "*His is all that is in the heavens and the earth. He is the Most High, the Supreme One.*" (Verse 4) People are often deluded, thinking that they own something of what they have in their hands; it appears to be at their disposal and they use it for their own benefit. Theirs, however, is not true ownership. The true owner is God who creates, brings to life and deals death. He alone can give people whatever He wishes, withhold,

take away or replace what He chooses. He is the One who determines the nature of everything and conducts this in accordance with the law He has chosen. Everything, then, complies with this law and behaves according to it. Every single thing in the universe, thus, belongs to God, who is the sole owner, without partners. He is the '*Most High, the Supreme One.*' His ownership is marked by His supremacy, making everything else appear lowly and inferior.

When this truth is well established in our minds, we know to whom we should turn to request what we wish for good things, provisions and earnings. Since He is the owner of the heavens and the earth, it is He who can decide what to give. Moreover, being '*the Most High, the Supreme*', He does not degrade or demean those who stretch out their hands requesting what they want from Him, as they would feel if they made their requests to other creatures. The *sūrah* then gives us an aspect of the significance of God's sole ownership of the universe and His supremacy. We see this in the heavens that are almost rent asunder, overawed as they are by God's greatness, when they realize that some earth dwellers deviate from the right way. We also see this in the angels' action as they glorify their Lord and pray to Him to forgive those who live on earth: "*The heavens are well-nigh rent asunder from above as the angels extol their Lord's limitless glory and praise, and beg forgiveness for all who are on earth. Surely God is Much-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful.*" (Verse 5)

The 'heavens' are those creatures which we see above us wherever we are on earth and of which we know very little. We now know that these heavens include at least one hundred million galaxies, every one of which includes one hundred million stars like our sun which is larger than our earth by at least a million times. These galaxies, which humans have managed to establish with their telescopes, are scattered in space, with large distances between them, amounting to hundreds of thousands of light years. Yet these very heavens are almost rent asunder from above, fearing God, the Supreme, because some people on earth overlook His supremacy which the rest of the universe feels with a clear sense of awe.

"*The angels extol their Lord's limitless glory and praise, and beg forgiveness for all who are on earth.*" (Verse 5) The angels are creatures

whose obedience to God is absolute. Hence, they should be the most reassured of all creatures. Yet they never cease to extol God's praise because they feel His total supremacy and fear that they may fall short in extolling His glory. By contrast, humans, the earth dwellers, reject and deviate. Hence, the angels fear that God's anger may, thus, be incurred and they begin to pray to Him to forgive the people of earth for the sins they perpetrate. The verse may also refer to the angels praying for the forgiveness of believers, as stated in *Sūrah* 40, the Forgiving One: "*Those who bear the Throne and those around it extol their Lord's limitless glory and praise, and have faith in Him, and pray for the forgiveness of all believers.*" (40: 7) We see here how the angels dread that any act of disobedience is committed on earth, even by believers. They pray to God for forgiveness, knowing that He is surely '*Much-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful.*' (Verse 5)

This opening of the *sūrah* ends with a reference to those who take for themselves protectors other than God, when it has become clear that no one else in the universe can give any protection. In this way, He makes it clear to His messenger that he is not responsible for them. It is God who watches over them and He will deal with them as He likes: "*As for those who take for their protectors beings other than Him, God watches them, and you are not responsible for them.*" (Verse 6)

Those miserable people who seek protection with beings other than God, are like those who clutch nothing but thin air. They hold nothing in their hands. Little as they and their alleged protectors are, they appear to us weak and insignificant as they are subject to God's power. The Prophet, and the believers with him, need not think or worry about them. God will make His own decision about them.

This truth must be well established in the hearts of all believers so that they are reassured, and this whether the unbelievers appear to wield power on earth or not. No matter how arrogant and tyrannical the ones wielding power are, they remain insignificant as long as they do not derive their power from God, and as long as God watches over them and encompasses them with His might. The whole universe around them believes in God and they alone are the ones who deviate, just like an odd beat in a beautiful symphony. From another point of view, the believers are reassured as they learn that they are not held in

any way responsible for anyone who turns away and deviates. Their only task is to give sincere and sound counsel. It is God who ultimately holds people's hearts in His hand. With such reassurance, the believers can continue along their way, caring nothing for the unbelievers and their deviation.

The Mother City

> *So We have revealed to you a discourse in the Arabic tongue in order that you may warn the Mother City and all who dwell around it; that you may forewarn them of the Day of the Gathering, of which there is no doubt, when some shall be in paradise and some in the blazing fire. Had God so willed, He could have made them all one single community, but He admits to His grace whoever He will, whereas the wrongdoers will have no one to protect them and no one to support them. Have they chosen protectors other than Him? God alone is the Protector of all; He is the One who gives life to the dead; and He has power over all things.* (Verses 7–9)

Here we are back with the truth stated at the beginning, with this new aspect of the truth of revelation now closely intertwined. There is a clear link between the separate letters the *sūrah* begins with and the fact that the Qur'ān is revealed in Arabic. These letters constitute part of the Arabic alphabet, and the Qur'ān delivers its message in Arabic, for a particular purpose: "*in order that you may warn the Mother City and all who dwell around it.*" (Verse 7) The Mother City is Makkah, which is honoured by the presence of God's Sacred House, the first ever built for worship. God has chosen that this Mother City and its surroundings should be the place where His final message is revealed, expressing the Qur'ān in its Arabic tongue, for His particular purpose: "*God knows best whom to entrust with His message.*" (6: 124)

When we look today, with hindsight, reviewing events and circumstances, studying the line the message has followed to produce its results, we can partly understand God's wisdom behind the choice of this particular spot on earth, at that particular time, to be the base

of the final message addressed to all mankind. Its universal nature was made clear from its early days.

At the advent of this final Divine message, the earth was more or less divided between four empires: the Byzantine Empire, which stretched from Europe over some parts of Asia and Africa; the Persian Empire, which ruled large parts of Asia and some African areas; and also the Indian and Chinese Empires. The latter two were confined to their areas, each having its own faith and limited political relations outside of their territories. This isolation made the first two the real superpowers, which enjoyed far reaching influence over human life and its development. The two Divine religions, Judaism and Christianity, were in one way or another under the influence of these two empires, and were effectively controlled by the then political authorities controlling them. Hence, both religions suffered distortion.

Judaism in particular suffered persecution under the Byzantines at one stage and under the Persians at another. It had practically no power on earth. Several factors contributed to its becoming confined to the Children of Israel, with neither ambition nor desire to attract other communities.

Christianity, on the other hand, was born within the Byzantine Empire which ruled Palestine, Syria and Egypt where Christianity spread secretly. The Byzantine authorities launched a wicked persecution campaign against the Christian faith leading to massacres that claimed the lives of tens of thousands. When this decimation ended with the conversion of a Byzantine emperor to Christianity, he brought with him pagan Byzantine legends and Greek philosophy, which was also pagan in nature. These imparted an alien colour to Christianity, turning it into something totally different from its original Divine revelation. Moreover, political power in Byzantium continued to wield the real authority, allowing religion only a minor influence. In addition, the different Christian schools were at loggerheads with one another, thereby weakening the Church and threatening to engulf the whole empire in acrimony. In turn, this also led to further persecution of those who dissented from the official doctrine. Yet both parties, those who toed the official line and those who dissented from it, deviated from true Christianity.

The Arabian Environment

At this juncture, Islam was revealed. It was a message that aimed to save humanity from the corruption, persecution, immorality and blind ignorance that had spread into all populated areas. It aimed to lead humanity on a way to God, providing light and guidance. Hence, it was necessary that Islam should have power and authority in order to accomplish the great transformation in human life that was required. It was imperative, therefore, that Islam start its operation in a free land, over which none of those empires had any control, so as not to let any power that was alien to its nature influence it. On the contrary, it was necessary that Islam have the power to shape its own domain and to influence its own surroundings. The Arabian Peninsula, especially the Mother City and its neighbouring areas, provided the best place on earth for the emergence of Islam and from where it would start its global march.

There was no established government with laws, legislation, an army, a police force or complete authority in Arabia, ensuring proper control over its population as was the case in the empires we have described. Moreover, Arabia did not have a clear and well-defined religion. Indeed, the opposite was true: in Arabia there was a medley of pagan beliefs. People worshipped a great variety of deities, including angels, *jinn*, stars and idols. Although the Ka'bah and the Quraysh enjoyed some overall religious hegemony in the Arabian Peninsula, this did not constitute a real authority that could mount firm opposition to the new faith. Had it not been for their economic interests and special position, the Quraysh chiefs would not have opposed Islam as solidly as they actually did. They realized how hollow and confused their beliefs were. In this way, then, the loose and weak political and religious systems in Arabia provided the best environment for the emergence of the new Islamic faith, one where it could not be influenced by any real authority alien to its nature.

Moreover, Arabia's unique social make-up provided a measure of protection for this new message. The Arabian system was tribal, where each clan had its weight and position. When Muḥammad (peace be upon him) started preaching Islam, his Hāshimite clan provided him with protection, and the general tribal balance provided him with a

good opportunity to go about his task. Other clans did not wish to fight against the Hāshimite clan realizing that the majority of its people did not follow Muḥammad's faith. Indeed, the clans were very reluctant to assault any individual Muslim who had real clan affiliation. They left the task of punishing such individuals to their own families. Indeed, those weaker elements and slaves who embraced the faith were tortured by their own masters. Therefore, Abū Bakr used to buy such slaves and free them, thus making them immune to such persecution. Needless to say, this situation provided the new faith with a particularly suitable environment to establish itself. Furthermore, the qualities of the Arabs, including their bravery, warm-heartedness, pride and sense of honour stood them in good stead and qualified them to be the bearers of this new message.

At the time, the Arabian Peninsula benefited from a suitably fertile soil to support a general renaissance. It had people with various abilities and potentials ready to serve such a development as and when it started. Experience had been accumulated as a result of trips to the nearest areas within the Byzantine and Persian Empires. The most notable of these trips were the winter one to the south and the summer one to the north. These are mentioned in the Qur'ān: "*For the tradition of the Quraysh, their tradition of travelling in winter and summer. Let them worship the Lord of this House, who provided them with food against hunger, and with security against fear.*" (106: 4) Many other circumstances helped to build a great wealth of experience which was coupled with a natural readiness to receive the great task assigned to Arabia, making it the birthplace of God's final message to mankind. When Islam began to be revealed, it made use of this wealth of experience and utilized all latent potential. It was thus able to tap the readily available Arabian resources to serve its message. Perhaps this explains the presence of a large number of great men among the Prophet's Companions such as Abū Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthmān, 'Alī, Ḥamzah, al-'Abbās, Abū 'Ubaydah, Sa'd ibn Abī Waqqāṣ, Khālid ibn al-Walīd, Sa'd ibn Mu'ādh, Abū Ayyūb al-Anṣārī and many others who warmed to Islam and embraced it. No doubt all these people were able to rise to a far higher standard under Islam, but they had the potential to so rise in the first place.

The Division of Mankind

Thus the Qur'ān was revealed in Arabic to warn the Mother City and its surrounding area. When the Arabian Peninsula moved out of ignorance into Islam and became totally Muslim, it carried the banner of Islam, moving with it to the East and to the West. These Muslims presented Islam and the human system based on it to the world, since, by nature, this message is addressed to all humanity. They were the best and most suitable people to advocate it, stemming as it did from the most suitable place for its birth and growth.

It was by God's design that the Prophet lived until Arabia, with all its population, embraced Islam. The land chosen to be the cradle of Islam now permanently adopted the full colours of the new faith. Likewise, the language to express it and deliver it to the world was clearly chosen. Arabic had by that time achieved full maturity so as to be most suitable for delivering God's message to all corners of the world. Had Arabic been a deficient or immature language, it would not have been able to embody the message in the first place, or to deliver it to people outside Arabia. In short, the language, the people and the environment were all the best suited for this great universal event. Thus, wherever we look in our attempt to understand God's purpose, wisdom and choice, we find a long list of positive factors converging together to provide the new message with the conditions most suited for its welcome. This confirms God's statement: "*God knows best whom to entrust with His message.*" (6: 124)

> *So We have revealed to you a discourse in the Arabic tongue in order that you may warn the Mother City and all who dwell around it; that you may forewarn them of the Day of the Gathering, of which there is no doubt, when some shall be in paradise and some in the blazing fire.* (Verse 7)

The hardest, most fundamental and often repeated warning in the Qur'ān is that concerning the Day of Gathering, when God will gather together all creatures from all generations and places, prior to dividing them into two groups according to what they did during their life on earth, the place where people choose what to do: "*some shall be in paradise and some in the blazing fire.*" (Verse 7)

> *Had God so willed, He could have made them all one single community, but He admits to His grace whoever He will, whereas the wrongdoers will have no one to protect them and no one to support them.* (Verse 8)

God could, if He wished, create people in a different form so as to make their behaviour and actions uniform. Had He done so, their end would have been the same and they would all go either to heaven or to hell. However, in His limitless glory, God created man for a purpose, assigning to him the task of building human life on earth. In order for this task to be accomplished He made it necessary for man to have special qualities distinguishing him from both angels and devils, as also from all types of creation with a nature of singular direction. In this respect, then, He gave man qualities and abilities which make some people lean towards guidance, light and good action, while others lean towards error, darkness and evil action. Each group follows one of these two susceptibilities inherent in human nature, leading them to the end determined for the type of action they choose: "*some shall be in paradise and some in the blazing fire.*" (Verse 7) Thus God will "*admit to His grace whoever He will, whereas the wrongdoers will have no one to protect them and no one to support them.*" (Verse 8) His decisions are based on His knowledge of the conditions of both parties and whether they follow guidance and thus deserve His grace or go astray and thus deserve His punishment.

It has already been mentioned that some people take protectors for themselves other than God. Now, the *sūrah* makes it clear that "*the wrongdoers will have no one to protect them and no one to support them.*" (Verse 8) The fact is that their alleged protectors do not exist.

Again, the *sūrah* disapprovingly asks: "*Have they chosen protectors other than Him?*" (Verse 9) It follows this rhetorical question with a statement making it clear that God is the only protector who is able to do everything. His power is clearly seen in the fact that He brings the dead back to life. This is indeed the action which shows His unique power at its most splendid: "*God alone is the Protector of all; He is the One who gives life to the dead.*" (Verse 9) His power is then stated to be total and to extend over all beings, with no limits whatsoever: "*He has power over all things.*" (Verse 9)

Who Judges in Disputes?

The *sūrah* returns to the central issue, identifying the ultimate point of reference in judging any dispute. It is this new revelation from God, containing His judgement. This ensures that changeable personal preferences and fleeting desires cannot influence life under the Divine code that admits no prejudice:

> *Whatever the subject of your disputes, the final word belongs to God. Such is God, my Lord. In Him have I placed my trust, and to Him do I always turn. He is the Originator of the heavens and the earth. He made mates for you from among yourselves, just as He made mates for animals, so that you will multiply. Nothing bears even the slightest comparability to Him. He alone hears all and sees all. His are the keys of the heavens and the earth. He gives abundant sustenance, or gives it in scant measure to whomever He wills. He has full knowledge of everything.* (Verses 10–12)

These verses express a number of facts, but the way these are stated and their sequence and juxtaposition in this short passage is truly remarkable, requiring proper reflection. Upon such reflection, the interlinking between their inner and outer aspects is both subtle and precise. Everything over which dispute arises between people should be judged by God: "*Whatever the subject of your disputes, the final word belongs to God.*" (Verse 10) God has made His judgement clear in this Qur'ān, stating His final word concerning this life and the life to come. He also established the code of living which people should follow in their personal and community lives, in their dealings among themselves, their system of government and their moral values and manners. He has made all this abundantly clear, making the Qur'ān a comprehensive constitution for human life, with a scope that is broader than their own constitutions. Therefore, should dispute arise between them, the right judgement is ready for them, outlined in His revelation delivered to them by His messenger.

When this truth has been established, the verse quotes the Prophet's statement whereby he clearly submits himself and all his affairs to God,

turning to Him in all situations: "*Such is God, my Lord. In Him have I placed my trust, and to Him do I always turn.*" (Verse 10) Thus, the Prophet's statement that he turns to God, places all his trust in Him and relies on Him in all situations, occurs at the most suitable point, serving as it does as a comment on the preceding rule. When God's messenger who receives guidance from God declares his attitude in these terms, how can other people refer their disputes to anyone else or place their trust in other beings? Knowing that God is his Lord who provides everything for him and guides him to what is best, the Prophet makes his choice, turning to Him alone. How can others make a different choice?

When this is established in a believer's heart, he sees his way ahead, clearly defined and well enlightened. He does not look for any other way. He is confident, reassured, knowing where to go. He entertains no doubt because he knows that God takes care of him and protects him. Moreover, he attaches a high value to his system which he derives from God's revelations, clear in his mind that no system can be superior to God's word.

A further comment is then made to consolidate this truth: "*He is the Originator of the heavens and the earth. He made mates for you from among yourselves, just as He made mates for animals, so that you will multiply. Nothing bears even the slightest comparability to Him. He alone hears all and sees all.*" (Verse 11) The One who revealed the Qur'ān to provide final judgement on all people's disputes is "*the Originator of the heavens and the earth,*" who controls them. The law that governs the heavens and the earth is His final judgement on all that concerns them. Human life is only a part of what takes place in the heavens and the earth. Therefore, His judgement on human matters ensures harmony between human life and the life of the great universe.

God, to whose judgement they should refer all their disputes, is the One who created them and moulded their souls: "*He made mates for you from among yourselves.*" (Verse 11) Thus He designed your life giving it its very foundation. He knows what is best for you and what suits your life, putting it in harmony with the rest of His creation: "*just as He made mates for animals.*" (Verse 11) This unity in biological

form confirms the unity of will and design. Hence, people and animals multiply and procreate in the same natural process. By contrast, He is alone in the way He is, with no comparability to anything or anyone: "*Nothing bears even the slightest comparability to Him.*" (Verse 11) Human nature accepts this without hesitation. The Creator of all cannot be compared to anything He creates. Therefore, His creatures refer to Him when they differ. They cannot refer to anyone else alongside Him because nothing is comparable to Him.

Although God, in His limitless glory, is beyond comparability with anyone or anything, contact between Him and His creation is not severed. On the contrary, "*He alone hears all and sees all.*" (Verse 11) His judgement is that of the One who knows, hears and sees.

Given that He makes His judgement final in all people's disputes, this can only mean that this rule is based on the fact that having originated the heavens and the earth and set their laws in operation, He continues to hold their keys: "*His are the keys of the heavens and the earth.*" (Verse 12) Since mankind are only part of what lives in the heavens and earth, the same fact applies to them, which means that the keys and treasures of the universe belong to God. Moreover, it is He who provides them with sustenance, determining its measure in the same way as He conducts all affairs: "*He gives abundant sustenance, or gives it in scant measure to whomever He wills.*" (Verse 12) It is He who gives them the food they eat and the water they drink, providing everything they need in their lives. Can they, then, refer to anyone else for judgement in their affairs? It is the most natural procedure for people to turn to the One who controls all this according to His perfect knowledge: "*He has full knowledge of everything.*" (Verse 12) Needless to say, the One who knows everything is the One who can make a final judgement in all fairness.

This is just one example of how the meanings of the component parts of the *sūrah*'s verses converge in complete harmony and perfect subtlety to work on the human heart. It is akin to the harmonious tones that combine to make a superb melody.

The Same Faith of Old

Once more the *sūrah* addresses its central theme:

> *In matters of faith, He has ordained for you the same as He had enjoined on Noah – that which We have revealed to you [Muḥammad] – and as We enjoined on Abraham, Moses and Jesus: 'Steadfastly uphold the faith and do not divide into factions.' Hard for the idolaters is that which you call on them to accept. God draws to Himself whoever He pleases and guides to Himself everyone who turns to Him. They became divided, out of selfish rivalry, only after the knowledge had reached them. Had it not been for a decree that had already been issued by your Lord, until a term set [by Him], all would have been decided between them. As it is, those after them, who inherited the Divine book, are in grave, disquieting doubt about it. Therefore, call people to that faith, and follow the straight path as you have been commanded. Do not follow their likes and dislikes, but say: 'I believe in whatever revelation God has bestowed from on high. I am commanded to ensure justice between you. God is our Lord and your Lord. To us shall be accounted our deeds, and to you, your deeds. Let there be no argument between us and you. God will bring us all together, and to Him we shall all return.* (Verses 13–15)

The *sūrah* began with a general reference to the unity of the source of all Divine faiths: "*Thus has God, the Almighty, the Wise, sent revelation to you, Prophet, and to those who preceded you.*" (Verse 3) Now it gives more details of this fact, pointing out that the legislation God has enacted for Muslims is, in essence, the same as He legislated for Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus, requiring them all to establish the Divine faith and not to split into factions over it. This requires that they, in turn, steadfastly pursue the Divine code of living, paying no heed to the desires of those who fall into dispute. This Divine faith is thus meant to govern human life, while those who argue about God have no leg to stand on. They are the ones who are warned of the painful punishment they might incur.

This passage enjoys the same level of perfect harmony as the preceding one: "*In matters of faith, He has ordained for you the same as He had*

enjoined on Noah – that which We have revealed to you [Muḥammad] – and as We enjoined on Abraham, Moses and Jesus: 'Steadfastly uphold the faith and do not divide into factions.'" (Verse 13) Thus the *sūrah* confirms the truth we explained at its very outset: God is the source of all Divine religions, starting far back in history. A little touch is added here which has a pleasant, subtle effect on every believer. He or she looks out to see who were their predecessors on this long line only to find that they were those noble elite: Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muḥammad (peace be on them all). Every believer then realizes that he has joined their procession, travelling the same way they travelled. He will then enjoy his journey along that way, no matter how much trouble, persecution or deprivation he suffers. Who would not put up with trouble, knowing that it is only transient, when he is assured of the company of such an elite nobility?

Moreover, there is a profound sense of peace between believers in the one Divine faith who implement His law. No conflict or dispute arises between them. They feel their strong bond urging them to collaborate and understand each other so that they can maintain the link between present and past.

Since the religion God ordained for the Muslims who believe in Muḥammad is the same as He enjoined on Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus, why do the followers of Moses and Jesus fight against each other? Indeed, what causes fighting between the followers of different Christian sects? Why do the followers of Moses and Jesus go to war against the followers of Muḥammad? And why do those idolaters who claim to follow Abraham's faith wage a war against Muslims? Should not all these group together under the one banner hoisted by God's last messenger? The same order was issued to them all: "*Steadfastly uphold the faith and do not divide into factions.*" (Verse 13) Only when they unite under this banner do they uphold the faith, fulfil its duties, maintain its path and work under the same banner hoisted high in succession by Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus until it was eventually carried by Muḥammad, who received the final testament.

The idolater Arabs in the Mother City and its surrounding area, who claimed to follow Abraham's faith, adopted a different stance towards the new faith: "*Hard for the idolaters is that which you call on*

them to accept." (Verse 13) They found it hard that revelation should be vouchsafed to Muḥammad, when they wanted it to be given to a person of high position and authority among them. Muḥammad's personal qualities of unblemished honesty and perfect reliability, which they readily acknowledged, and his lineage descending from the noblest family among them, did not match, in their view, the status of a tribal chief who exercised power in his tribe. In short, it was far too difficult for them to accept that their own religious authority, founded on paganism and its legends, had come to an end. They realized that its ending threatened the economic and personal interests that such authority had given them. Hence they held on to their pagan beliefs, refusing to accept the message of God's oneness advocated by His noble messenger. Similarly difficult for them was that they were told that their idolatrous ancestors were in error. Therefore, they maintained their folly choosing to cast themselves in hell rather than acknowledge the truth.

The *sūrah* comments on their attitude stating that God chooses whom He wills and guides everyone who wishes to follow His guidance: "*God draws to Himself whoever He pleases and guides to Himself everyone who turns to Him.*" (Verse 13) He drew Muḥammad to Himself and chose him to deliver His message. He always leaves the way wide open for anyone who turns to Him and seeks His guidance.

Division in Religion

Again the *sūrah* speaks of the followers of earlier messengers who divided into sects and groups although the messengers preached the same faith: "*They became divided, out of selfish rivalry, only after the knowledge had reached them. Had it not been for a decree that had already been issued by your Lord, until a term set [by Him], all would have been decided between them. As it is, those after them, who inherited the Divine book, are in grave, disquieting doubt about it.*" (Verse 14) Their divisions did not come about as a result of ignorance, or because they did not know the single source that grouped their messengers and faiths together. They divided after knowledge was given to them. This division was caused by selfish rivalry and mutual envy. Thus, they were not only unjust to the truth but also to themselves. There was no

single reason based on the true faith for their division. Had they been true to their faith, they would have remained united.

They deserved to be immediately taken to task in requital for their division and deviation, but God, in His wisdom, had already ordained to allow them time, up to a specified point only He knows: "*Had it not been for a decree that had already been issued by your Lord, until a term set [by Him], all would have been decided between them.*" (Verse 14) Thus, the truth is established and falsehood is seen in its true guise. Matters are settled in this present life, but judgement is deferred until the Day of Resurrection. The generations that came after the division that split the followers of every one of God's messengers received the faith and the Divine book uncertain of its truth. Division, then, had allowed doubt and confusion to creep in, making people unable to determine which of the numerous doctrines and groups was right: "*As it is, those after them, who inherited the Divine book, are in grave, disquieting doubt about it.*" (Verse 14)

Faith cannot be taken in this way. Faith is the solid rock on which a believer stands ensuring that he remains steadfast in his beliefs, even when the whole world around him is shaking hard. Faith is his guiding star that assures him of his way when different forces try to pull him in opposite directions. When faith itself becomes subject to such strong doubts, nothing remains certain in man's mind. He cannot be sure which way to take and which course to follow. Reassurance is no longer available to him. God revealed the Divine faith so that those who follow it would know the way that leads them to Him and ensures His pleasure. In turn, they too would be able to lead other people along the right way, unaffected by doubt or uncertainty. When they themselves become immersed in doubt, however, they cannot lead anyone anywhere.

Such was the state the followers of earlier prophets were in at the time Islam was revealed. Syed Abū'l Ḥasan 'Alī Nadwī, an eminent Indian scholar, writes:

> Great religions became playthings in the hands of debased clergymen who corrupted and twisted them beyond recognition, so much so that, if it were possible for their founders to return to the physical life, they would not have recognized them.

> As a result of the moral debasement of the great centres of civilization and general disorder and unrest, people everywhere became entangled in their internal problems. They had no message to offer to the world. The world had become hollow from within; its life-springs had dried up. It possessed neither the light of religious guidance for personal conduct, nor any abiding and rational principle for running a state.[1]

Additionally, J.H. Denison, a European author, writes:

> In the fifth and sixth centuries the civilized world stood on the verge of chaos. The old emotional cultures that had made civilization possible, since they had given to men a sense of unity and of reverence for their rulers, had broken down, and nothing had been found adequate to take their place...
>
> It seemed then that the great civilization that it had taken four thousand years to construct was on the verge of disintegration, and that mankind was likely to return to that condition of barbarism where every tribe and sect was against the next, and law and order were unknown. *The old tribal sanctions had lost their power. Hence the old imperial methods would no longer operate.* The new sanctions created by Christianity were working division and destruction instead of unity and order. It was a time fraught with tragedy. Civilization, like a gigantic tree whose foliage had overreached the world and whose branches had borne the golden fruits of art and science and literature, stood tottering, its trunk no longer alive with the flowing sap of devotion and reverence, but rotted to the core...
>
> It was among these people that the man was born who was to unite the whole known world of the east and south... Mohammed...[2]

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1. Nadwī, Abū'l Ḥasan 'Alī, *Islam and the World*, Leicester, 2005, p. 2.

2. Denison, J.H., *Emotion as the Basis of Civilization*, New York and London, 1928, pp. 265–269.

– This quotation runs in the Arabic text as one continuous paragraph. Apparently the author used an Arabic translation which was an abridged one, with some difference of emphasis in places. The italicized sentence is omitted in the Arabic text, but it was felt necessary to include it here in order not to affect the author's flow. – Editor's note.

It is because of such divisions among the followers of earlier messengers and the doubts engulfing their subsequent generations, and because the leadership of mankind was in desperate need of someone who was certain of the way to God, that the last messenger, Muḥammad, (peace be upon him), was sent to all mankind. God commanded him to deliver His message, holding firm to it, paying no heed to the conflicting creeds around him. He was to announce the rebirth of the Divine faith embodied in the one message that God gave to all prophets:

> *Therefore, call people to that faith, and follow the straight path as you have been commanded. Do not follow their likes and dislikes, but say: 'I believe in whatever revelation God has bestowed from on high. I am commanded to ensure justice between you. God is our Lord and your Lord. To us shall be accounted our deeds, and to you, your deeds. Let there be no argument between us and you. God will bring us all together, and to Him we shall all return.* (Verse 15)

This is a new leadership for all mankind; a strong leadership, sure of its way and firm in its beliefs. It advocates its message equipped with true insight, and follows God's orders without deviation, steering away from all conflicting forces. This new leadership of mankind declares that the Divine message is one and the way to which it guides people is the same. Thus, all Divine faith comes from one source and mankind must turn to that source only: "*Say: I believe in whatever revelation God has bestowed from on high.*" (Verse 15) Its constitution and policy is based on truth and justice: "*I am commanded to ensure justice between you.*" (Verse 15) This new leadership has definite authority enabling it to declare justice among all mankind even at the time when it was confined to the narrow valleys of Makkah, where its followers suffered unrelenting persecution. Yet its authority was clear to all. It clearly announces that: (1) the Lord of the universe is the One Lord: "*God is our Lord and your Lord.*" (Verse 15); (2) everyone is responsible for their own actions: "*To us shall be accounted our deeds, and to you, your deeds.*" (Verse 15); (3) all argument is ended as God's final word is given: "*Let there be no argument between us and you.*" (Verse 15); and

(4) all affairs are left to God for His final judgement: "*God will bring us all together, and to Him we shall all return.*" (Verse 15)

This single verse with short, clear and decisive statements describes the nature of this last message in all its clarity. It is a message that means to follow its own way, unaffected by people's desires. It aims to extend its authority so as to ensure justice between all people. Its objective is to show the one way leading to God since it is the only way defined by all messages.

As the issues have thus been clarified and the community of believers have assuredly responded to God's message, the argument of those still disputing about God appears to be both singular and trivial, lacking basis and weight. A final word is stated about them making clear that they will have to face the punishment they have been warned against: "*As for those who argue about God after He has been acknowledged, their argument is null and void in their Lord's sight: anger will fall upon them and severe suffering awaits them.*" (Verse 16) Whoever posits an argument that is null and void in God's sight has nothing to offer. Not only are his arguments proven false in this life, but in the life to come he will incur God's anger and face severe punishment for persisting with such falsehood.

Hastening the Last Hour

Yet another round is started to drive the central theme of the *sūrah* home to us:

> *It is God who has bestowed revelation from on high, setting forth the truth, and established the balance. For all you know, the Last Hour may well be near. Those who do not believe in it seek to hasten it, whereas the believers stand in awe of it and know it to be the truth. Those who argue about the Last Hour have gone far astray. God is most kind towards His creatures. He provides for whoever He will. He is the Powerful, the Almighty. To anyone who desires a harvest in the life to come, We shall grant an increase in his harvest; whereas to the one who desires a harvest in this world, We shall give a share of it, but he will have no share in the life to come.* (Verses 17–20)

It is God who revealed His book to set forth the truth, and it is He who ordained justice, making His book the criterion to judge in all disputes among the followers of earlier religions, as also in all disputes that arise between people. He based all His laws on true and accurate justice, which is comparable to a balance that weighs values, rights and actions. The same verse also mentions the Last Hour, which is a frequent Qur'ānic reference to the Day of Judgement. Its mention is appropriate because it is the time set for the final judgement based on absolute justice. The Last Hour belongs to the realm that is beyond the reach of human perception. Hence, no one can be sure of when it is due: "*For all you know, the Last Hour may well be near.*" (Verse 17) People prefer to ignore it when it is close to them. It will inevitably bring them to the fair reckoning which takes every little detail into account, overlooking nothing.

The *sūrah* describes the different attitudes of people concerning the Last Hour: "*Those who do not believe in it seek to hasten it, whereas the believers stand in awe of it and know it to be the truth.*" (Verse 18) The ones who do not believe in it neither feel its seriousness nor understand what awaits them when it comes. Hence, it is no wonder that they take a frivolous attitude asking for it to be hastened. In contrast, the believers are certain of it and, as a result, they shudder as they think about it, dreading its outcome. They know what it is like when it finally comes. They also know it to be the truth, for they have always had their bond with the truth. Whereas, "*those who argue about the Last Hour have gone far astray.*" (Verse 18) Having gone far astray, it is difficult for them to turn back.

The *sūrah* now speaks about the sustenance God, out of His grace, provides for all people. "*God is most kind towards His creatures. He provides for whoever He will. He is the Powerful, the Almighty.*" (Verse 19) The link between this verse and the previous one speaking about the Last Hour and the different attitudes people take towards it seems unclear. However, it becomes very apparent when we read the next verse: "*To anyone who desires a harvest in the life to come, We shall grant an increase in his harvest; whereas to the one who desires a harvest in this world, We shall give a share of it, but he will have no share in the life to come.*" (Verse 20)

God provides for all His servants, the good and the bad, the believer and the unbeliever. People are too weak to be able to provide for themselves. God has brought them into life and given them what meets their basic needs. Had He chosen not to provide for the unbelievers and the wrongdoers, they would not have had anything and would have died of thirst and hunger. Had this been the scenario, God's purpose of giving them life and allowing them a chance to do what may be counted for or against them would not have been fulfilled. Therefore, He attached the question of provisions to different factors related to life situations and personal abilities. He made it part of the test people undergo in this life and the result of which is known only in the life to come. Thus, it has nothing to do with belief or unbelief, goodness of character or personality.

Furthermore, God has made both this life and the life to come as a harvest for people, and they choose the type of harvest they want. A person who wants to have the harvest of the life to come will work to achieve this. God will help such people because of what they intend and bless their work. They will not only have their harvest in the life to come, but will also have whatever God has apportioned to them of provisions in this life. They will lose nothing of it. On the contrary, their provisions in this world may be, in as far as they are concerned, the means to achieve their harvest in the life to come. Such people use what God provides for them, investing, enjoying and spending it only in ways that are acceptable to, and please Him. By contrast, those who desire only a harvest in this life will have the provisions God has allocated for them, denying them nothing of this, but they will have nothing in the life to come. They do not work for such a harvest, and as a result, they receive nothing.

A glance at each group is sufficient to expose the folly of the one who desires only their harvest in this life. God grants both groups the provisions they will have in this life as He has determined. No one will miss out on any of it. What is achieved in the life to come is that which people actually desire and work for.

Among those who work only for the harvest of this life we find some who are rich and some who are poor, according to their means of earning a livelihood. Such means are interlinked with general

situations, local circumstances and personal abilities. The same applies in equal measure to those who desire a harvest in the life to come. There is absolutely no difference between the two groups in this present life concerning their livelihood. The difference, however, will be obvious in the life to come. So what folly makes anyone abandon the harvest of the life to come, when this will not change his lot in this life even by a small measure?

Ultimately, the matter is determined by the truth and the balance established by the book God has revealed. Truth and justice are evidently seen in providing sustenance for all people, and all living things, as also in increasing the harvest of the life to come or denying the same to those who desire only this present life.

Fearing One's Deeds

The basic truth providing the central theme of the *sūrah* again comes in for further discussion:

> *Do they believe in alleged partners [of God] who ordain for them things which God has not sanctioned? Were it not for God's decree on the final judgement, all would have been decided between them. Painful suffering awaits the wrongdoers. You will see the wrongdoers full of fear on account of what they have done, which is bound to fall back on them. And you will see those who believe and do righteous deeds in the flowering meadows of the gardens of paradise. They will have whatever they wish from their Lord. This is indeed the supreme bounty. It is of this [bounty] that God gives good news to His servants who believe and do righteous deeds. Say: 'No reward do I ask of you for this. It is only an act of affection due to kin.' Whoever does good, We shall increase it for him. God is Most-Forgiving, Most-Appreciative.* (Verses 21–23)

The *sūrah* earlier stated that what God has legislated for the Muslim community is the same as He had enjoined on Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus. In other words, all this is embodied in what God revealed to Muḥammad (peace be upon him). At this point, the *sūrah* employs a rhetorical question addressing the unbelievers' beliefs and practices:

essentially, these are contrary to what God has ordained in His messages, so who ordained the same for the unbelievers, without God's sanction?

"*Do they believe in alleged partners [of God] who ordain for them things which God has not sanctioned?*" (Verse 21) None of God's creatures may legislate anything that is at variance with what He legislates. It is God alone who legislates for all His creation. It is He who has created the universe and conducts its affairs through natural laws He has set in operation. Human life is merely a small gear in the great cog of the universe. Therefore, its law should be consistent with the laws governing the universe and its operation. This can only be achieved when the law of human life is enacted by the One who has full knowledge of universal law. No one other than God has such knowledge. Hence, no one can be entrusted with the task of legislating for human life.

Although the logic of this fact is abundantly clear, still there are many who dispute it or who are not convinced of its truth. They dare to enact laws and legislation that are at variance with God's law, claiming that they are only choosing what is good for their peoples, ensuring that their laws fit their specific circumstances. In doing so they suggest that they know better than God and are wiser than Him. The only other justification they put forward is that they believe in some beings whom they allege to be God's partners, and that it is these who enact laws for them that are not sanctioned by God. There can be no greater folly than such impudence.

God has enacted for mankind laws that He knows to be in harmony with their nature on the one hand and with the nature of the universe they live in on the other. Thus, His law ensures the maximum cooperation and harmony among mankind as also with universal powers. In all this, He has put in place basic principles. He has left it for people to enact legislation concerning the details that suit their needs according to their level of development, provided that such legislation remains within the framework of the principles He has laid down. Should people differ over something in this regard, they should refer the matter to God and the balance He has established through these principles. People must make sure that every detailed law they enact fits with this balance. In this way, the source of legislation remains one and the ultimate word remains God's. He is indeed the best of all judges. Anything that differs with this constitutes deviation from God's

law and the religion He ordained for Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muḥammad (peace be upon them all).

"*Were it not for God's decree on the final judgement, all would have been decided between them.*" (Verse 21) God has made His decree to defer judgement to the final day. Had he not decreed such deferment, He would have made His judgement now, punishing those who deviate from His law. However, He postpones this to the Day of Judgement when "*painful suffering awaits the wrongdoers.*" (Verse 21) Such suffering is in requital for their wrongdoing. Can there be anything more erroneous than choosing man-made laws in preference to God's law?

Those wrongdoers are shown as they will be on the Day of Judgement, afraid of what will happen to them. During their lives on earth, however, they entertained no such fear. On the contrary, they ridiculed the reckoning and asked for it to be hastened: "*You will see the wrongdoers full of fear on account of what they have done, which is bound to fall back on them.*" (Verse 22) In the Arabic original they are described as 'full of fear for what they have done', as if their deeds are some fearful beast. Yet they performed these deeds with their own hands, enjoying their actions. Still, when they face these same deeds they are full of fear, realizing that they are '*bound to fall back on them,*' as though the deeds themselves are transformed into a punishment they cannot avoid.

Conversely, we see the believers who used to be in awe of what would happen on that day now feeling safe, reassured, enjoying what God grants them: "*And you will see those who believe and do righteous deeds in the flowering meadows of the gardens of paradise. They will have whatever they wish from their Lord. This is indeed the supreme bounty. It is of this [bounty] that God gives good news to His servants who believe and do righteous deeds.*" (Verses 22–23) The whole image is one of bliss and happiness. Those believers are '*in the flowering meadows of the gardens of paradise*', where they will have '*whatever they wish from their Lord.*' There is no limit to His bounty, which is indeed supreme. This is, then, the good news that God gives to His righteous servants. It is good news that is shown to be ready, immediate, confirming the earlier promise of good things to come.

With such a pleasant image imparting an air of relaxed enjoyment, the Prophet is instructed to say to them that he seeks no reward from

them for the guidance he gives them, leading them to such lasting bliss and sparing them the painful suffering. He only gives them such guidance because he loves them; they are his kinsfolk. This is enough reward for him: "*Say: No reward do I ask of you for this. It is only an act of affection due to kin. Whoever does good, We shall increase it for him. God is Most-Forgiving, Most-Appreciative.*" (Verse 23)

The Prophet enjoyed relations with every single clan of the Quraysh tribe. Hence, he was keen that they should take up the guidance he was giving because it would bring them endless benefit. His motivation in all this was the affection he had for them as his kindred. He considered this as sufficient reward for his efforts.

This, then, is the meaning that sparked in my mind whenever I read this Qur'ānic expression about the Prophet's reward being merely an act of affection he does to his kinsfolk. There is, however, a different interpretation of it which I will state here because it is included in the authentic *Ḥadīth* anthology of Imām al-Bukhārī. Ṭāwūs, a scholar from the *Tābi'īn* generation, asking 'Abdullāh ibn 'Abbās about this phrase. Another scholar, Sa'īd ibn Jubayr, answered first saying: 'It refers to the relatives of the Prophet.' Ibn 'Abbās said: 'You have been too quick! The Prophet had relations among every clan of the Quraysh. Hence he said to them that all he asked for was that they should be kind to his own kinsfolk.'" According to this interpretation, the verse should be translated as: "*Say: No reward do I ask of you for this other than the affection due to kin.*" This means that they should stop causing him harm, which is something due one's relatives, and that they should listen to the guidance he gave them. This would be his reward from them. This interpretation by Ibn 'Abbās is closer to the verse's meaning than that of Sa'īd ibn Jubayr. However, I still feel that the interpretation I suggested is closer to the point. God knows best the meanings of His words.

Thus, within the context of the gardens of paradise and the good news he gives them, the Prophet reminds them that he asks no reward for anything he gives them. People normally demand hefty fees for advice that is well below what the Prophet gave his people. This is all part of God's grace. He does not deal with people according to principles of commerce, nor according to justice; instead He deals with them in accordance with the principles of grace and bounty: "*Whoever*

does good, We shall increase it for him." (Verse 23) It is not merely that the Prophet seeks no reward whatsoever from people; they are further promised increase in their reward for good deeds. In addition, they shall have forgiveness and their deeds will be appreciated: "*God is Most-Forgiving, Most-Appreciative.*" (Verse 23)

God's Word of Truth

Once more the *sūrah* refers to the basic fact behind its central theme:

> *Do they say, 'He has invented a lie about God?' If God so willed, He could seal your heart and blot out all falsehood, and establish the truth by His words. He has full knowledge of what is in people's hearts.* (Verse 24)

This verse tackles the last excuse the unbelievers offer to justify their attitude to revelation: "*Do they say, 'He has invented a lie about God?'*" (Verse 24) Is this why they do not believe the Prophet, claiming that God has not revealed anything to him? Such a claim is invalid. God would not allow anyone to fabricate lies about Him, claiming to receive revelations from Him when he does not, without taking that person to task. He is easily able to seal such a person's heart rendering him incapable of saying anything like the Qur'ān. He is also able to expose the falsehood such a person says and establish the truth: "*If God so willed, He could seal your heart and blot out all falsehood, and establish the truth by His words.*" (Verse 24) All Muḥammad's thoughts are known to God, even before Muḥammad (peace be upon him) expresses them: "*He has full knowledge of what is in people's hearts.*" (Verse 24)

This last excuse is, thus, seen to be hollow and unfounded. Moreover, it is contrary to what is well established of God's knowledge of everyone's inner thoughts, His ability to accomplish what He wills and His law that remains in operation, establishing the truth and blotting out all falsehood. Thus, the revelation of the Qur'ān is truly from God, and what Muḥammad (peace be upon him) says is the truth. Claiming anything different from this is no more than a false allegation, one that is immersed in error.

2

God's Signs in the Created World

It is He who accepts the repentance of His servants and who pardons bad deeds. He knows everything you do. (25)

وَهُوَ ٱلَّذِى يَقْبَلُ ٱلتَّوْبَةَ عَنْ عِبَادِهِۦ وَيَعْفُوا۟
عَنِ ٱلسَّيِّـَٔاتِ وَيَعْلَمُ مَا تَفْعَلُونَ ﴿٢٥﴾

He responds to those who believe and do righteous deeds, and gives them much more of His bounty; but as for the unbelievers, severe suffering awaits them. (26)

وَيَسْتَجِيبُ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَعَمِلُوا۟
ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ وَيَزِيدُهُم مِّن فَضْلِهِۦ ۚ
وَٱلْكَٰفِرُونَ لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ شَدِيدٌ ﴿٢٦﴾

If God were to grant plentiful provisions to His servants, they would behave on earth with much insolence. As it is, He bestows from on high in due measure, as He wills. He is fully aware of His creatures, and He sees them all. (27)

وَلَوْ بَسَطَ ٱللَّهُ ٱلرِّزْقَ لِعِبَادِهِۦ لَبَغَوْا۟ فِى
ٱلْأَرْضِ وَلَٰكِن يُنَزِّلُ بِقَدَرٍ مَّا يَشَآءُ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ
بِعِبَادِهِۦ خَبِيرٌۢ بَصِيرٌ ﴿٢٧﴾

It is He who sends down rain when they have lost all hope, and spreads His grace far and wide. He is the Protector, worthy of all praise. (28)

وَهُوَ ٱلَّذِى يُنَزِّلُ ٱلْغَيْثَ مِنۢ بَعْدِ
مَا قَنَطُوا۟ وَيَنشُرُ رَحْمَتَهُۥ ۚ وَهُوَ
ٱلْوَلِىُّ ٱلْحَمِيدُ ﴿٢٨﴾

Among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and all the living creatures which He placed in them. He has the power to gather them all whenever He will. (29)

وَمِنْ ءَايَٰتِهِۦ خَلْقُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ
وَمَا بَثَّ فِيهِمَا مِن دَآبَّةٍ ۚ وَهُوَ عَلَىٰ جَمْعِهِمْ
إِذَا يَشَآءُ قَدِيرٌ ﴿٢٩﴾

Whatever misfortune befalls you is the outcome of what your own hands have done; but God forgives much. (30)

وَمَآ أَصَٰبَكُم مِّن مُّصِيبَةٍ
فَبِمَا كَسَبَتْ أَيْدِيكُمْ وَيَعْفُوا۟
عَن كَثِيرٍ ﴿٣٠﴾

Never can you elude Him on earth. You have none to protect you from God and none to give you support. (31)

وَمَآ أَنتُم بِمُعْجِزِينَ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ ۖ وَمَا لَكُم
مِّن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ مِن وَلِىٍّ وَلَا نَصِيرٍ ﴿٣١﴾

And among His signs are the ships that sail like floating mountains through the seas. (32)

وَمِنْ ءَايَٰتِهِ ٱلْجَوَارِ فِى ٱلْبَحْرِ كَٱلْأَعْلَٰمِ ﴿٣٢﴾

If He wills, He stills the wind, and then they lie motionless on the surface of the sea. In this there are signs indeed for all who are patient in adversity and deeply grateful to God; (33)

إِن يَشَأْ يُسْكِنِ ٱلرِّيحَ فَيَظْلَلْنَ رَوَاكِدَ
عَلَىٰ ظَهْرِهِۦٓ ۚ إِنَّ فِى ذَٰلِكَ لَءَايَٰتٍ لِّكُلِّ
صَبَّارٍ شَكُورٍ ﴿٣٣﴾

or else He may cause them to perish because of what they have wrought and yet He forgives much. (34)

أَوْ يُوبِقْهُنَّ بِمَا كَسَبُوا۟ وَيَعْفُ
عَن كَثِيرٍ ﴿٣٤﴾

Let those who call Our messages into question know that there is no escape for them. (35)

وَيَعْلَمَ ٱلَّذِينَ يُجَٰدِلُونَ فِىٓ ءَايَٰتِنَا
مَا لَهُم مِّن مَّحِيصٍ ٣٥

Whatever you are given is but for the enjoyment of life in this world, but that which is with God is much better and more enduring. [It shall be given] to those who believe and place their trust in their Lord; (36)

فَمَآ أُوتِيتُم مِّن شَىْءٍ فَمَتَٰعُ ٱلْحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنْيَا
وَمَا عِندَ ٱللَّهِ خَيْرٌ وَأَبْقَىٰ لِلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟
وَعَلَىٰ رَبِّهِمْ يَتَوَكَّلُونَ ٣٦

who shun grave sins and gross indecencies; and who, when angered, will forgive; (37)

وَٱلَّذِينَ يَجْتَنِبُونَ كَبَٰٓئِرَ ٱلْإِثْمِ وَٱلْفَوَٰحِشَ
وَإِذَا مَا غَضِبُوا۟ هُمْ يَغْفِرُونَ ٣٧

who respond to their Lord, attend regularly to their prayer, conduct their affairs by mutual consultation, and give generously out of what We have provided for them; (38)

وَٱلَّذِينَ ٱسْتَجَابُوا۟ لِرَبِّهِمْ وَأَقَامُوا۟
ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ وَأَمْرُهُمْ شُورَىٰ بَيْنَهُمْ وَمِمَّا
رَزَقْنَٰهُمْ يُنفِقُونَ ٣٨

and who, when oppressed, defend themselves. (39)

وَٱلَّذِينَ إِذَآ أَصَابَهُمُ ٱلْبَغْىُ هُمْ يَنتَصِرُونَ ٣٩

An evil deed is requited by an evil like it, but the one who forgives and puts things right will have his reward with God. He does not love wrongdoers. (40)

وَجَزَٰٓؤُا۟ سَيِّئَةٍ سَيِّئَةٌ مِّثْلُهَا فَمَنْ
عَفَا وَأَصْلَحَ فَأَجْرُهُۥ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ إِنَّهُۥ
لَا يُحِبُّ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ٤٠

However, no blame attaches to those who defend themselves after having been wronged. (41)

وَلَمَنِ ٱنتَصَرَ بَعْدَ ظُلْمِهِۦ فَأُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ مَا عَلَيْهِم مِّن سَبِيلٍ ﴿٤١﴾

Blame attaches only to those who oppress other people and transgress in the land against all right. For such, there is painful suffering in store. (42)

إِنَّمَا ٱلسَّبِيلُ عَلَى ٱلَّذِينَ يَظْلِمُونَ ٱلنَّاسَ وَيَبْغُونَ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ بِغَيْرِ ٱلْحَقِّ ۚ أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ﴿٤٢﴾

As for the one who is patient in adversity and forgives; this requires the exercise of a truly strong resolve. (43)

وَلَمَن صَبَرَ وَغَفَرَ إِنَّ ذَٰلِكَ لَمِنْ عَزْمِ ٱلْأُمُورِ ﴿٤٣﴾

He whom God lets go astray will have no one else to protect him. When the wrongdoers come face to face with the suffering [awaiting them], you will see them exclaiming, 'Is there any way of return?' (44)

وَمَن يُضْلِلِ ٱللَّهُ فَمَا لَهُۥ مِن وَلِىٍّ مِّنۢ بَعْدِهِۦ ۗ وَتَرَى ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ لَمَّا رَأَوُا۟ ٱلْعَذَابَ يَقُولُونَ هَلْ إِلَىٰ مَرَدٍّ مِّن سَبِيلٍ ﴿٤٤﴾

You shall see them brought before the fire, disgraced and humiliated, looking with a furtive glance. The believers will then say: 'The true losers are the ones who have forfeited themselves and their kindred on this Day of Resurrection.' Indeed the wrongdoers will fall into long-lasting suffering. (45)

وَتَرَىٰهُمْ يُعْرَضُونَ عَلَيْهَا خَٰشِعِينَ مِنَ ٱلذُّلِّ يَنظُرُونَ مِن طَرْفٍ خَفِىٍّ ۗ وَقَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓا۟ إِنَّ ٱلْخَٰسِرِينَ ٱلَّذِينَ خَسِرُوٓا۟ أَنفُسَهُمْ وَأَهْلِيهِمْ يَوْمَ ٱلْقِيَٰمَةِ ۗ أَلَآ إِنَّ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ فِى عَذَابٍ مُّقِيمٍ ﴿٤٥﴾

No protector whatever will they have to help them against God. He whom God lets go astray shall find no way forward. (46)

وَمَا كَانَ لَهُم مِّنْ أَوْلِيَآءَ يَنصُرُونَهُم مِّن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ ۗ وَمَن يُضْلِلِ ٱللَّهُ فَمَا لَهُۥ مِن سَبِيلٍ ﴿٤٦﴾

Respond to your Lord before there comes, by God's will, a day that cannot be put off. There shall be no refuge for you on that day, nor shall you be able to deny your sins. (47)

ٱسْتَجِيبُوا۟ لِرَبِّكُم مِّن قَبْلِ أَن يَأْتِىَ يَوْمٌ لَّا مَرَدَّ لَهُۥ مِنَ ٱللَّهِ ۚ مَا لَكُم مِّن مَّلْجَإٍ يَوْمَئِذٍ وَمَا لَكُم مِّن نَّكِيرٍ ﴿٤٧﴾

If they turn away, We have not sent you to be their keeper. Your only duty is to deliver the message [entrusted to you]. When We give man a taste of Our grace, he rejoices in it, but if misfortune befalls him on account of what he has done with his own hands, he is bereft of gratitude. (48)

فَإِنْ أَعْرَضُوا۟ فَمَآ أَرْسَلْنَٰكَ عَلَيْهِمْ حَفِيظًا ۖ إِنْ عَلَيْكَ إِلَّا ٱلْبَلَٰغُ ۗ وَإِنَّآ إِذَآ أَذَقْنَا ٱلْإِنسَٰنَ مِنَّا رَحْمَةً فَرِحَ بِهَا ۖ وَإِن تُصِبْهُمْ سَيِّئَةٌۢ بِمَا قَدَّمَتْ أَيْدِيهِمْ فَإِنَّ ٱلْإِنسَٰنَ كَفُورٌ ﴿٤٨﴾

To God belongs sovereignty over the heavens and the earth. He creates what He will. He grants female offspring to whomever He will, and male to whomever He will; (49)

لِّلَّهِ مُلْكُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ ۚ يَخْلُقُ مَا يَشَآءُ ۚ يَهَبُ لِمَن يَشَآءُ إِنَٰثًا وَيَهَبُ لِمَن يَشَآءُ ٱلذُّكُورَ ﴿٤٩﴾

أَوْ يُزَوِّجُهُمْ ذُكْرَانًا وَإِنَاثًا ۖ وَيَجْعَلُ مَن يَشَاءُ عَقِيمًا ۚ إِنَّهُ عَلِيمٌ قَدِيرٌ ﴿٥٠﴾

or gives both male and female to whomever He will, and causes whomever He will to be barren. He is all-knowing, infinite in His power. (50)

وَمَا كَانَ لِبَشَرٍ أَن يُكَلِّمَهُ اللَّهُ إِلَّا وَحْيًا أَوْ مِن وَرَاءِ حِجَابٍ أَوْ يُرْسِلَ رَسُولًا فَيُوحِيَ بِإِذْنِهِ مَا يَشَاءُ ۚ إِنَّهُ عَلِيٌّ حَكِيمٌ ﴿٥١﴾

It is not granted to any human being that God should speak to him except through revelation or from behind a veil, or by sending a messenger to reveal by His command what He will. He is Exalted, Wise. (51)

وَكَذَٰلِكَ أَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْكَ رُوحًا مِّنْ أَمْرِنَا ۚ مَا كُنتَ تَدْرِي مَا الْكِتَابُ وَلَا الْإِيمَانُ وَلَٰكِن جَعَلْنَاهُ نُورًا نَّهْدِي بِهِ مَن نَّشَاءُ مِنْ عِبَادِنَا ۚ وَإِنَّكَ لَتَهْدِي إِلَىٰ صِرَاطٍ مُّسْتَقِيمٍ ﴿٥٢﴾

Thus have We revealed a spirit to you [Muḥammad] by Our command. You knew neither revelation nor faith, but We made it a light, guiding with it whoever We will of Our servants. You most certainly give guidance to the straight path, (52)

صِرَاطِ اللَّهِ الَّذِي لَهُ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ ۗ أَلَا إِلَى اللَّهِ تَصِيرُ الْأُمُورُ ﴿٥٣﴾

the path of God, to whom belongs all that is in the heavens and earth. Most certainly, to God all things shall in the end return. (53)

Overview

In this second part of the *sūrah*, the discussion continues to point to signs confirming the truth of faith within people's own selves and in the wide horizons. Further discussion is added about God's power and its evidence in people's surroundings and what affects their livelihood. The distinctive qualities of believers also come in for discussion. Towards the end of the *sūrah* we have further discussions on what the first part focused on, namely, revelation, its nature and how it is delivered. The two parts are closely linked, as both address the human heart and put the way to faith before us.

Affluence and People's Behaviour

> *It is He who accepts the repentance of His servants and pardons bad deeds. He knows everything you do. He responds to those who believe and do righteous deeds, and gives them much more of His bounty; but as for the unbelievers, severe suffering awaits them. If God were to grant plentiful provisions to His servants, they would behave on earth with much insolence. As it is, He bestows from on high in due measure, as He wills. He is fully aware of His creatures, and He sees them all.* (Verses 25–27)

These verses follow immediately after the verses that show the wrongdoers dreading having to face what they have done given it will inevitably fall back on them. Those verses also painted an image of the believers as they revel in their rewards, secure in the flowering meadows of paradise. Moreover, those earlier verses confirmed what the Prophet delivered to them of God's message and stated that God is fully aware of what their hearts may harbour.

As this second part opens, it calls on people to turn to God and abandon their erroneous ways before a final judgement is passed on them. The door to repentance is left wide open. God Almighty accepts repentance and pardons bad deeds. Hence, there is no need to despair, go further into disobedience, or panic because of the sins they have committed. God knows what they do, and He certainly knows sincere

repentance and accepts it, just as He knows their past sins and pardons them for these.

Again the *sūrah* refers to what believers and unbelievers will receive in reward or punishment. Those who believe and do good deeds are the ones who respond to their Lord's call. He, therefore, gives them an increase of His bounty. By contrast, "*As for the unbelievers, severe suffering awaits them.*" (Verse 26) Yet the door to repentance, which will spare the repentant all suffering, is open to all at all times. Any unbeliever who repents will qualify for God's bounty which is, in the life to come, plentiful, unlimited. In this life, however, it is given according to a set criterion. God knows that in their lives on earth, human beings cannot cope with God's bounty should it be given to them without measure: "*If God were to grant plentiful provisions to His servants, they would behave on earth with much insolence. As it is, He bestows from on high in due measure, as He wills. He is fully aware of His creatures, and He sees them all.*" (Verse 27)

Compared to the limitless bounty granted in the hereafter, the provisions people have in this life, no matter how abundant they may seem, are very small indeed. God knows that His human creatures can only cope with a small measure of richness. If He were to grant them abundance, of the sort He grants them in the life to come, they would behave with much insolence. They are too small to maintain their balance; too weak to cope with their burdens when these exceed a certain limit. God is fully aware of their limitations. Therefore, He keeps His bounty to them in this present life within the limits they can cope with. He keeps His unlimited bounty till later, and gives it only to those who pass the test of this life, reaching the life to come in safety. They will then receive His limitless bounty.

> *It is He who sends down rain when they have lost all hope, and spreads His grace far and wide. He is the Protector, worthy of all praise.* (Verse 28)

Again, we are reminded of some aspects of God's grace as He bestows it on people living on earth. We see them here when they have gone without rain for some time. They feel their powerlessness as water, life's

necessity, is denied them. They are in total despair. At this point, the skies open and God's grace is spread far and wide. The land is alive again, green shoots spring up, the seeds that have been planted promise a good yield, the weather moderates, smiles are back on people's faces and hope is regained. What separates the old despair from the new hope is no more than a few minutes during which the gates of God's grace are open and rain pours down: "*He is the Protector, worthy of all praise.*" (Verse 28) His help is available at all times. He is not only worthy of praise in Himself but also for all His attributes.

The Arabic text uses the term *ghayth* to refer to rain. The term connotes providing emergency help for those who are in desperate need. The effects are given as God '*spreads His grace*', which enhances feelings of hope and happiness that we actually experience as we look at the emerging vegetation. Nothing has a greater comforting and calming effect on people than rain pouring down after a period of drought. Nothing helps to remove tension and worry better than seeing the land blooming after it has been barren and desolate.

What Causes Misfortune

> *Among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and all the living creatures which He placed in them. He has the power to gather them all whenever He will. Whatever misfortune befalls you is the outcome of what your own hands have done; but God forgives much. Never can you elude Him on earth. You have none to protect you from God and none to give you support.* (Verses 29–31)

These verses refer to a universal sign that is there for all to see, endorsing the truth the revelation testifies to, even though they continue to doubt it. The sign they see in the heavens and the earth is very clear, admitting no doubt. It addresses human nature in the language it understands. No one seriously argues about it. It states the fact that neither man nor any other of God's creation was the originator of the heavens and the earth. Admitting that they have a Creator, therefore, is inescapable. The heavens and the earth are huge, yet they demonstrate a meticulous harmony and function endlessly according to consistent

laws. This cannot be logically explained except by acknowledging that they have been created by God who conducts their affairs. Human nature directly receives this logic imparted by the universe, understands and accepts it before it hears any word that may be said about it by any external source.

This universal sign incorporates another, for God did not only create the heavens and the earth. He also created "*all the living creatures which He placed in them.*" (Verse 29) Life on our planet alone is another sign, so how should we conceive of other types of life unknown to us existing elsewhere in the universe. Life on this planet is a secret no one has yet managed to fathom, let alone aspire to initiate. It is a secret engulfed with mystery. We do not know how or from where it comes; nor do we know how it entwines with other creatures. All attempts to identify its source or nature have failed to open these closed doors. All research is necessarily confined to the development of living creatures, after they have life, and their variety and functions. Even in this limited scope, there are conflicting views and theories. Behind the curtain, however, there remains the great secret that no mental understanding can explore. It belongs to God alone.

All living creatures, everywhere, on earth and within it, in the deep sea and at high altitude, not to think of the rest of creatures beyond our world, are largely unknown to us. Indeed man only knows about a small number of them. All these creatures that God has placed in the heavens and the earth can be gathered by God whenever He wills. Not a single one of them will go astray or absent itself.

People cannot gather together a flock of domestic birds should they flee their cages, or bees that escape their hive. Everywhere on earth there are collections of different types of birds, bees, ants, insects, bacteria, cattle, beasts, fish, sea mammals, as well as human communities. There are also in the heavens other creatures that may be greater in number and that live in habitats about which we know nothing. Yet God can gather all these together if He so pleases. The time it takes between their placement in their different habitats and their gathering together is no more than the uttering of one word. The verse, here, therefore, contrasts the placement of all these creatures everywhere in the universe with their gathering: it is all done in just a

moment. In true Qur'ānic style, these two great scenes are juxtaposed in one short verse that takes only a few seconds to read.

The *sūrah* then tells them of what happens to the unbelievers in this life, as a result of what they perpetrate. Yet God does not take them to task for all this; He overlooks a great many of their actions. It describes their powerlessness as they occupy only a small corner of the living world: "*Whatever misfortune befalls you is the outcome of what your own hands have done; but God forgives much. Never can you elude Him on earth. You have none to protect you from God and none to give you support.*" (Verses 30–31)

In the first of these two verses we see in action both God's justice and His grace as He bestows it on man. Every misfortune or calamity that befalls man is a direct result of what man does, but God does not hold him to account for all his deeds. He knows man's weakness and the desires inherent in his nature which often tempt and overpower him. Therefore, God pardons much of what man does. In the second verse we see man as he truly is: weak, powerless and without support. From whom, then, can he seek protection other than from the One who protects all?

Control of Natural Laws

> *And among His signs are the ships that sail like floating mountains through the seas. If He wills, He stills the wind, and then they lie motionless on the surface of the sea. In this there are signs indeed for all who are patient in adversity and deeply grateful to God; or else He may cause them to perish because of what they have wrought and yet He forgives much. Let those who call Our messages into question know that there is no escape for them.* (Verses 32–35)

Ships that traverse the sea are yet another of God's signs, just like mountains. It is a sign seen by all. They represent a phenomenon that is based on several factors each of which is a great sign put in place by God Almighty. Who created the sea? Can any human or any other creature claim that they made the sea? Who gave the sea its different characteristics: the density of its water, its depth and vast area allowing

it to carry such large craft? Then what about the wind that moves the ships that were known to those who were the first to be addressed by the Qur'ān; and what about other forces that man was subsequently able to use such as steam and nuclear power, and other forces God may place at man's disposal in future? Who has given these forces their qualities that make them able to move such huge ships in the sea, so that they look like mountains on its surface?

"*If He wills, He stills the wind, and then they lie motionless on the surface of the sea.*" (Verse 33) The wind may die down at times and ships will lie motionless, as though life has departed from them. "*In this there are signs indeed for all who are patient in adversity and deeply grateful to God.*" (Verse 33) The signs are both in making the ships sail across the sea and in leaving them motionless. Such signs are appreciated by everyone who is patient in adversity, thankful for blessings. Patience and gratitude are often mentioned together in the Qur'ān, as they are interrelated qualities of believers in conditions of hardship and happiness.

"*Or else He may cause them to perish because of what they have wrought.*" (Verse 34) He may cause the ships to be destroyed or drowned as a result of people's sins or deviation from the faith that all creatures acknowledge, with the exception of the unbelievers. "*And yet He forgives much.*" (Verse 34) He certainly does not punish people for every sinful action they do. Instead, He pardons and forgives much.

"*Let those who call Our messages into question know that there is no escape for them.*" (Verse 35) Should God want to smite them, destroy their ships or visit them with some other punishment, they simply have no means of escape. Thus they are made to know that whatever they possess of this life's riches, comforts and pleasures can always be taken away from them. The only thing that is stable in this present life is to maintain a close relation with God.

A Community Moulded by Faith

The *sūrah* takes another step forward, alerting them to the fact that whatever they have in life on earth is transient. The only lasting value is what God grants in the life to come to those who have believed and

placed their trust in Him. Some of the distinctive qualities that make of true believers a separate community are then given:

> *Whatever you are given is but for the enjoyment of life in this world, but that which is with God is much better and more enduring. [It shall be given] to those who believe and place their trust in their Lord; who shun grave sins and gross indecencies; and who, when angered, will forgive; who respond to their Lord, attend regularly to their prayer, conduct their affairs by mutual consultation, and give generously out of what We have provided for them; and who, when oppressed, defend themselves. An evil deed is requited by an evil like it, but the one who forgives and puts things right will have his reward with God. He does not love wrongdoers. However, no blame attaches to those who defend themselves after having been wronged. Blame attaches only to those who oppress other people and transgress in the land against all right. For such, there is painful suffering in store. As for the one who is patient in adversity and forgives; this requires the exercise of a truly strong resolve.* (Verses 36–43)

Earlier in the *sūrah*, we had a description of the conditions pertaining to mankind. We learnt that those given revelations divided into groups: and such divisions were caused by petty rivalries rather than any lack of knowledge of the Divine book and the faith God established for mankind from the times of Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus (peace be upon them all). It also pointed out that the generations that followed those who were in dispute entertained serious doubts about Divine revelations. Needless to say, the conditions of those who did not receive revelations and had no messenger to guide them along the right path were even worse. Therefore, mankind needed wise leadership to save it from the depth of ignorance into which it had sunk and to guide its footsteps along the way that leads man to God, his Lord and the Lord of all the worlds. Therefore, God revealed this Qur'ān, in the Arabic tongue, to His servant Muḥammad, (peace be upon him), incorporating in it what He had enjoined upon Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus. Thus all phases of the Divine message, from early history, are linked together. The path it follows and the goals it aims to achieve

are the same. With this final message, the Muslim community comes into existence, assuming the leadership of mankind and setting a model of how the Divine faith functions in human life.

The present verses describe the distinctive qualities of this community that make it a community apart. Although these verses were revealed in Makkah, long before the establishment of the Muslim state in Madīnah, we note that one of these qualities is that its affairs are conducted on the basis of mutual consultation. This suggests that consultation is more deeply ingrained in the life of the Muslim community than its being the basis of its political system. It is, thus, an essential quality of the Muslim community. It then had to be carried further to the state, which is a natural progression from that of Muslim community. Another quality to be noted is that Muslims defend themselves when they come under oppression. Yet the order given to the Muslims in Makkah was that they should endure with patience and not retaliate. It was only after they migrated to Madīnah that a different order was given to them and permission to fight was granted: "*Permission to fight is given to those against whom war is waged, because they have been wronged. Most certainly, God has the power to grant them victory.*" (22: 39) That this quality is mentioned in Makkan verses suggests that self defence against oppression is a permanent right of the Muslim community, while the instruction to remain patient and not to retaliate pertained to an exceptional and particular situation during the early period. The quality is mentioned here because an outline of the essential qualities of the Muslim community is given. Hence, this quality could not be overlooked, even though retaliation in self defence was not as then permitted.

The fact that these qualities are mentioned in this Makkan *sūrah*, long before the Muslim community had assumed practical leadership should be reflected upon. These qualities must be fulfilled by the Muslim community before it is fit to assume practical leadership. What are these qualities, and what value do they have in human life as a whole?

These qualities are: faith, placing our trust in God alone, refraining completely from grave sin and indecency, forgiving when angry, responding to God, attending regularly to prayer, conducting our affairs

through proper consultation, giving generously in charity, resisting oppression, forgiving other people, putting things right and remaining patient in adversity. We need to reflect a little on each of these qualities in the order they occur in the *sūrah*.

The *sūrah* sets before us the Divine standard of values, showing us which of these are transitory and which are enduring and inalterable. Muslims will, thus, have a clear vision, one free of confusion. This standard is outlined first as a prelude to the qualities of the Muslim community: "*Whatever you are given is but for the enjoyment of life in this world, but that which is with God is much better and more enduring.*" (Verse 36)

There are plenty of attractive and pleasant things in the life of this world: offspring, wealth, desires and their fulfilment, high social standing, power, as well as other things to enjoy. These are granted by God as part of His bounty that is unattached to people's behaviour in this life, but He adds blessing to those who are obedient to Him, even though their share is little, and denies such blessing to sinners even though their share is great indeed. Yet none of this is permanent or enduring. It is all short-lived; it neither raises nor lowers anyone's standing. Nothing of it reflects anyone's position with God, or provides an indication of His pleasure or displeasure with anyone. It is all a fleeting enjoyment. "*That which is with God is much better and more enduring.*" (Verse 36) It is better in essence and longer lasting. Compared to what is with God, all life enjoyments are trifling and short-lived. Its maximum duration is the life of the individual or the life of humanity. Both are no more than a fleeting moment in God's measure.

Having established this true fact, the *sūrah* outlines the qualities of the believers who are destined to enjoy the enduring blessings God has in store for them. The first of these qualities is faith: "*That which is with God is much better and more enduring. [It shall be given] to those who believe and place their trust in their Lord.*" (Verse 36) To believe is to recognize the first and basic truth without which man cannot know for certain anything in the universe. It is through believing in God that we begin to understand that the universe is created by Him. This is essential so that we know how to deal with the universe and learn about the laws that operate in it. We can then bring our lives into

harmony with the universe, so as not to deviate from its laws. Such harmony will impart ease and comfort in our lives. We will then move, together with the universe, in a way that submits to God and seeks His acceptance. This quality is necessary for every human being, but it is most essential for the Muslim community that seeks to lead humanity.

Faith also imparts reassurance and confidence, and dispels doubt, worry, fear and despair. These are necessary throughout our life journey, but they are all the more essential for the leader who charts the way ahead.

What faith gives to man is to free him from the pressures of personal desire, interest and gain. With faith, man's heart looks up to a goal that lies beyond his own soul. He realizes that he has no say in the course the Divine message takes; it is, after all, a message from God, while he is simply a worker employed by God. This realization is extremely important to the person who is in a position of leadership so that he does not allow despair to creep in should people turn away from him or should he suffer persecution. This realization also acts as a safeguard so that he does not become arrogant should he gain power. In every situation, he remains no more than a worker.

The first crop of Muslims accepted the faith in a way that remarkably influenced their mentality, morality and behaviour. Prior to Islam, the meaning of faith had been greatly weakened so that it no longer influenced people's morality and behaviour. Islam brought about a new model of faith, one that was alive and influential, enabling that community of believers to assume the task of leadership entrusted to it. Syed Abū'l Ḥasan 'Alī Nadwī writes about the effects of this character-moulding faith:

> Once the Gordian knot of disbelief had been cut, it was easy to unfasten the other knots that bound them. And once the Prophet had opened their hearts to Islam, he did not have to struggle at each step to make them reject Wrong and accept Right. They entered into the new faith with heart and soul and submitted themselves without demur to what the Prophet decreed…

> Thus, when they had attained to the highest pinnacle of moral development and become proof against the inducements of Satan and of their own baser self, when they had learned to prefer the future good to the immediate good and had been transformed into lovers of the Hereafter even while living in this world, when neither poverty could be a barrier in their path nor could riches make them vain, when they had become meek, yet unbending before power, and when they had come to be the dispensers of justice among men even though it might go against themselves, their own kith and kin, God made the whole world subservient to them and appointed them the Defenders of the Faith.[3]

He also elaborates on the effect of faith on people's morality:

> During the pre-Islamic era people generally worshipped inanimate objects which could neither help nor grant their petitions and had, in fact, been created merely to serve their needs. Hence, there was no real moral enthusiasm, no genuine spirituality in their religions. The God of their conception was an artisan who had retired into a corner after finishing His job. They believed that He had bequeathed His kingdom to those whom He had adorned with the mantle of Divinity and now it was they who controlled the affairs of the universe. They lacked any spiritual understanding of God. They did not know of Him as the Creator of the universe, and any awareness was akin to the knowledge of an historian who, when he is asked who constructed a certain building, replies that it was built by such and such a king, but the mention of the king's name neither inspires awe in his heart, nor makes any solemn impression on his mind. They had no intimate consciousness of the Divine attributes and, consequently, their hearts did not bear the imprint of God's glory and love…

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3. Nadwī, Abū'l Ḥasan 'Alī, *Islam and the World*, Leicester, 2005, pp. 41–42.

– Originally written in Arabic, this book has been heavily edited in its English version. I chose to include all quotations from it as they appear in its English version rather than provide a new translation that is more faithful to the original text. – Editor's note.

The Muslims in general and the Arabs in particular rejected this vague and sickly religiousness and attained a Faith which was at once intense and profound and which permeated through every fibre of their existence. They pledged their Faith in God Who has Excellent Attributes, Who is the Most Exalted, the Most Magnificent and the Master of the Day of Judgement. Says the Holy Qur'ān: "*God is He besides Whom there is no other god; The Sovereign, the Holy One, the Source of Peace [and Perfection], the Guardian of Faith, the Preserver of Safety, the Exalted in Might, the Irresistible, the Supreme; Glory to God [High is He] above the partners they attribute to Him. He is the Creator, the Evolver, the Bestower of Forms and Colours. To Him belong the Most Beautiful Names; Whatever is in the heavens and on earth, doth declare His Praises and Glory: and He is the Exalted in Might, the Wise.*" (59: 23–24)

He is the God Who is the Creator and the Preserver of the universe, Who rewards with paradise and chastises with hell, Who swells or shrinks the subsistence of whomsoever He likes, Who is the Knower of all that is hidden in the heavens and the earth, and Who knows the stealth of the eyes and the secrets of the hearts, and is the embodiment of beauty and sublimity, strength and splendour, perfection and beneficence.

This solemn conviction produced a miraculous transformation among the early followers of Islam. Whoever affirmed his faith in the One Transcendent God and testified to '*Lā ilāha illallāh*'[4] experienced a sudden change in himself. The innermost recesses of his soul were lit up with the sublime radiance of God-consciousness, the spirit and the flesh in him ceased to be the enemies of one another; he achieved equilibrium within himself and extraordinary feats of courage, endurance and faith were performed by the believer.

This faith was a wonderful source of moral training. It generated among its followers an amazing strength of will, self-criticism

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4. This phrase means, 'there is no deity other than God'. It is the first half of the declaration anyone who wishes to be a Muslim must make. The other half is, 'Muḥammad is God's messenger.' – Editor's note.

and justice, as nothing can help overcome the inducements of the self so successfully as living faith in the Omnipresence of God.

If anyone succumbed to evil or negative urges and fell into error, even unobserved, he would immediately confess to the Prophet and undergo the severest punishment willingly to save himself from Divine displeasure.[5]

Virtues such as honesty and trustworthiness developed in the early Muslims as the natural fruits of a sense of living belief in the Omnipresence of the Absolute God. Even when alone and unnoticed, or in any other situation wherein they could easily transgress the bounds of religious conduct, fear of God kept the Muslims under rigid control.[6]

The unruly Arabs, who were so lawless in their ways, surrendered themselves so absolutely to the guidance of the Faith that it was impossible for them to infringe the Divine law. They accepted the Sovereignty of God in its fullest sense. In peace and in war, in joy and in sorrow, in every relationship of life, at each turn of affairs and in the minutest details of their concerns they looked to His guidance and help and carried out His commands without the slightest demur.[7]

Qualities of the Faithful

Such is the effect of true belief in God to which the *sūrah* refers. To place one's complete trust in God is something such a belief entails, but the Qur'ān gives prominence to this quality: "*[It shall be given] to those who believe and place their trust in their Lord.*" (Verse 36) In the Arabic text, the inversion mode is used so as to make the sentence read, 'in their Lord they place their trust.' This implies that they do not place their trust in anyone other than God. This is indeed the first practical manifestation of believing in God's oneness. A believer knows God's attributes, believes in them all and is certain that no one does

5. Nadwī, ibid., pp. 42–44.
6. Ibid., p. 46.
7. Ibid., pp. 49–50.

anything unless He wills and nothing occurs without His sanction. Hence, his trust in God is complete. Everything he does or refrains from doing is aimed at winning His pleasure. Such a feeling is necessary for everyone. It enables man to stand with his head raised high, feeling inner certainty, reassured, fearing no one, able to withstand adversity, full of contentment in times of ease. Yet this feeling is far more necessary to a leader who is eager to fulfil his responsibilities.

"*Who shun grave sins and gross indecencies.*" (Verse 37) Purity of heart which ensures that behaviour is free of grave sin and indecency is a product of sound faith. It is also a necessary requirement for wise leadership. No one can maintain purity of heart and then indulge in grave sins and gross indecencies. A heart that lacks purity is totally unsuitable for leadership: its guiding light is obliterated by sin. Faith heightened the sensitivity of the first generation of Muslims enabling them to attain the standards described by Nadwi. It qualified them to provide a leadership of unprecedented and unequalled qualities. They remain the model to be emulated by later generations.

God is fully aware of man's weaknesses. Therefore, He has set the mark that qualifies people for the position of leadership at shunning grave sins and gross indecencies, not ordinary ones. His grace ensures that minor sins will be overlooked. This is an act of grace that He bestows on us which should arouse our feeling of humility before Him.

"*And who, when angered, will forgive.*" (Verse 37) This quality, mentioned immediately after the implicit reference to God's forgiveness of man's errors and sins, encourages an attitude of mutual forbearance and forgiveness between people. It highlights a characteristic of believers which makes them forgive when something angers them. Again we see the Islamic approach to human weakness. It does not require man to do anything beyond what he is capable of. God knows that anger is a natural human reaction and that it is not always bad. Feeling angry at something committed against God, faith, truth or justice is commendable and can bring about good results. Therefore, Islam does not forbid anger or consider it a sin. It recognizes it as a natural feeling, thus preventing conflict between man's religion and nature. However, it takes man by the hand to help him overcome his anger, encouraging him to pardon and forbear. It further makes such forgiveness one of

the important qualities of believers. It is well established that the Prophet was never angry at anything related to his own person. His anger, when it occurred, was only for God's sake and was overpowering. Yet such a high standard was set by Muḥammad (peace be upon him) who attained a high standard of greatness. Hence, God does not make this a standard that believers should attain to, but rather sets it as an ideal to strive for. What they are required to do is to forbear and forgive when angry, rising above the desire to retaliate, as long as this remains within the personal sphere.

"*Who respond to their Lord.*" (Verse 38) They remove all impediments that prevent such response. These impediments are within the human soul, created by one's desires, aspirations and ambitions. When all these impediments are removed, man finds the way to God smooth and wide open. His response is then free of any restraint or impediment.

The type of response is then shown in detail. The first aspect is that believers "*attend regularly to their prayer.*" (Verse 38) Prayer is given great importance in Islam. It comes second only to the first rule of faith, which is the declaration of one's belief in God's oneness and in Muḥammad as God's messenger. Prayer provides the bond between man and his Lord, and gives a practical example of human equality, with worshippers standing shoulder to shoulder in rows, with no distinction whatsoever between them.

Perhaps this is the reason why prayer is immediately followed, in this instance, by the quality of consultation within the Muslim community, giving it precedence over the payment of *zakāt* which is normally mentioned together with prayer. Thus, believers "*conduct their affairs by mutual consultation.*" (Verse 38) As it is phrased, the statement makes consultation a characteristic that pervades every aspect of their lives. As we have already said, this is a Makkan statement made long before the establishment of the Islamic state. This means that this quality is characteristic of the Muslim community in all situations, even though no state or government had as then been established. In fact, the state is only a natural by-product of the Muslim community and its intrinsic qualities. The Muslim community incorporates the state and together they ensure the implementation of the Islamic code of life both at individual and society levels.

For this reason, consultation was an early quality of the Muslim community and applied to a far greater area than the political arena. It is an essential aspect of Islamic life and a distinctive quality of the community entrusted with the role of leading mankind. Needless to say, it is a fundamental quality of sound leadership.

The way to conduct consultation is left for every generation and environment to decide. It is not cast in a rigid form that must always be followed. No Islamic system is outlined in a text that must be literally followed or set in a particular model that cannot be modified. They are first and foremost a product of a process that begins with the truth of faith taking root in man's heart so as to mould his thought and behaviour. Discussion about the details of an Islamic system while giving little attention to the truth of faith that gives rise to them is a futile exercise. What we are saying here may appear to anyone who is unaware of the truth of Islamic faith a theoretical discourse without firm basis. To suppose so is certainly wrong. A careful examination of its pure concepts of belief will show that Islam contains psychological and intellectual facts that have a profound effect on man, preparing the way to the rise of certain systems and situations in human society. The Qur'ānic and *Ḥadīth* texts then indicate the form that such systems and situations should take. Thus, the texts do not initiate the systems, but merely organize them. For any Islamic system to be established and functioning, it is necessary that a Muslim community should be in existence in which faith is actively working. Otherwise, no form is good enough to produce a system that can be described as Islamic. When a Muslim community is truly in existence, where people feel the truth of faith deep in their hearts, the Islamic system will naturally develop, taking a shape and form that suits that particular community, its environment and circumstances, working within the framework of the basic Islamic principles and effectively implementing them.

"*And give generously out of what We have provided for them.*" (Verse 38) This is again a requirement that preceded the determination of the different rates of *zakāt*, according to the type of property held. These rates were set in the second year after the Prophet migrated to Madīnah where he established the first Islamic state. However, the idea of allocating a portion of what God has given us to be spent in what

serves the Islamic cause came in the early stages of the life of the Muslim community. It goes back to the early days of its inception.

For Islam to be properly advocated it is necessary that Muslims should be ready to allocate money for its cause. This purges their hearts of greed and helps them rise above the instinctive desire to own. It demonstrates their reliance on God and what He has for them. All these are necessary for faith to be complete and firmly rooted. Moreover, it is necessary for the Muslim society. To advocate Islam is to be committed to strive for its cause. It is imperative that the community should demonstrate complete solidarity in such striving, whatever the outcome. At times, such solidarity needs to be complete, leaving no one any property that is considered his own. An example of this took place in the early days of Islam, when the Makkan Muslims migrated to Madīnah where they were given warm hospitality. When their situation became less acute, a permanent *zakāt* system was put in place. Be that as it may, the very concept of spending for the cause is an essential quality of the Muslim community.

"*And who, when oppressed, defend themselves.*" (Verse 39) As we stated earlier, that this quality is mentioned in a Makkan *sūrah* is significant. It means that rising against oppression and injustice is in the very nature of a community that is moulded to be the best among human communities. It enjoins what is right and fair, forbids what is wrong, and ensures that right and justice are implemented in human life. It is an honourable community that derives its honour from God: "*All honour belongs to God, and to His messenger and those who believe [in God].*" (63: 8)

In the early history of Islam, there was a period, when the Muslim community was still in Makkah, during which the Muslims were ordered not to fight, but to concentrate on attending to prayer and paying *zakāt*. This, however, was due to certain local reasons and to achieve a particular disciplinary objective that was especially relevant to the first Muslim Arab community. It should be emphasized that this was a temporary measure that does not contradict the essential qualities of the Muslim community.

There were, indeed, particular reasons behind this choice of a peaceful and patient approach during the Makkan period. One was that the

persecution the Muslims suffered at the time was not because of any recognisable authority holding sway in Arabian society. Instead, the tribal structure then pertaining made it rather loose politically and socially. Hence, a Muslim who belonged to a family of distinction could come to harm only at the hands of other members of his own family. No one else dared take any measure against him. A collective assault on a Muslim individual or on Muslims generally was a rare event. In addition, masters could torture or otherwise pain their slaves and weaker tribal elements if they chose to adopt Islam. Over time many of these were bought and set free by Muslims, and thus largely became immune to persecution. Furthermore, the Prophet did not wish to see a battle flaring up in every home between a Muslim and his family who had not as yet accepted Islam. It was, thus, a question of trying to soften hearts rather than harden them.

Another reason behind this peaceful approach was that the social environment encouraged support to anyone who was unjustly wronged or physically harmed. By being patient in adversity and holding to their faith despite persecution, Muslims could benefit by such support. This is what actually happened when the Hashimite clan, to which the Prophet belonged, were subjected to a social and economic boycott. The natural Arabian sense of justice rebelled against this wrongful boycott, enforcing its abrogation, despite the fact that it was originally solemnized by a written agreement which was then hung inside the Ka'bah.

Yet another reason was that resort to force and the use of arms was a characteristic of the Arabian social environment. People were always on edge, with little to enforce discipline. To ensure proper balance in the Muslim personality, this tendency needed to be restrained. People needed to rein in their feelings by setting themselves definite goals. It was also necessary that they should get used to being patient, despite adversity, and that they could control themselves and their actions. It was also necessary to make them feel that their every whim, desire and gain were secondary to their faith. Therefore, the requirement that they should remain patient in such adversity was consistent with the system that sought to educate them and bring about proper balance in their Islamic character.

It was for these and similar reasons that a policy of peaceful coexistence and perseverance was followed during the Makkan period, while the permanent nature of the Muslim community based on self defence when oppressed was also clearly stated: "*And who, when oppressed, defend themselves.*" (Verse 39) This rule is further confirmed as a permanent aspect of human life: "*An evil deed is requited by an evil like it.*" (Verse 40) Thus, justice requires that an evil act should be answered with an act of similar nature. Otherwise, evil would be left to triumph and expand; there would be no force to check it.

Forgiveness is encouraged so that believers seek reward from God and at the same time purge themselves of the desire to retaliate; this also ensures that society does not harbour grudges: "*But the one who forgives and puts things right will have his reward with God.*" (Verse 40) This is indeed an exception from the rule. It should be borne in mind that forgiveness can only be exercised by one who is able to requite evil with its like. It is only in such a case that forgiveness brings its desired results in both the perpetrator and the person who is wronged. When the perpetrator realizes that he has been pardoned out of the goodness of the other person, and not because of any weakness or inability to retaliate, he feels ashamed and appreciates that his opponent has scored a moral victory. Similarly, a strong person who forgives feels that he has the higher moral ground. Thus, forgiveness is better for both parties. This, however, does not apply in the case of weakness and inability to retaliate. Indeed, forgiveness does not exist in such a situation; it only encourages the aggressor and brings further humiliation to those wronged.

"*He does not love wrongdoers.*" (Verse 40) This statement reconfirms the rule that an evil act is requited by a similar one. It also implies that one should not exceed the wrong done when repelling evil.

We then have another confirmation, which is more detailed: "*However, no blame attaches to those who defend themselves after having been wronged. Blame attaches only to those who oppress other people and transgress in the land against all right. For such, there is painful suffering in store.*" (Verses 41–42) A wronged person who retaliates against injustice, repays an evil act with its like, and who makes sure not to transgress his limits, is simply exercising his legitimate right. Hence, no blame attaches to him. No one should prevent him from exacting

justice. The ones to be stopped are those who oppress and encroach on others. Human life cannot be set on a right basis while injustice continues unchecked and its perpetrators go about freely, fearing no consequence. God warns all perpetrators of injustice that they will be severely punished, but people must also rise against those responsible and prevent them from committing further injustice.

The *sūrah* again refers to the need for self restraint, patience in adversity and forgiveness in personal cases, when such forgiveness is exercised as an act of magnanimity taken from a position of strength and ability to retaliate: "*As for the one who is patient in adversity and forgives; this requires the exercise of a truly strong resolve.*" (Verse 43)

When we take these verses and similar texts together, we clearly see how they ensure balance between the two directions. They want a Muslim to be free of grudge, anger, weakness, servility, as also of injustice and oppression. A Muslim should always seek God's pleasure, aware that patience is his mainstay as he continues his life journey.

Together, these qualities which believers should have impart a distinctive character to the Muslim community, the community that is assigned the task of leading mankind.

What Price for a Second Chance?

Having outlined the qualities of believers who have ample and more lasting reward from God, the *sūrah* paints the opposite picture of those who go astray and inflict injustice. They will inevitably suffer humiliation:

> *He whom God lets go astray will have no one else to protect him. When the wrongdoers come face to face with the suffering [awaiting them], you will see them exclaiming, 'Is there any way of return?' You shall see them brought before the fire, disgraced and humiliated, looking with a furtive glance. The believers will then say: 'The true losers are the ones who have forfeited themselves and their kindred on this Day of Resurrection.' Indeed the wrongdoers will fall into long-lasting suffering. No protector whatever will they have to help them against God. He whom God lets go astray shall find no way forward.* (Verses 44–46)

What God wills is certain to take place. No one can change a course God has determined. Hence, "*He whom God lets go astray will have no one else to protect him.*" (Verse 44) When God knows, on the basis of a person's true attitude and actions that he deserves to be left astray, His word that this person be left to follow his own devices will be done. He will then have no one to save him from error or its ultimate results, or to assist in its retraction: "*When the wrongdoers come face to face with the suffering [awaiting them], you will see them exclaiming, 'Is there any way of return?' You shall see them brought before the fire, disgraced and humiliated, looking with a furtive glance.*" (Verses 44–45)

In this present world, the wrongdoers are normally arrogant, despotic and transgressors. Hence, their highlighted aspect on the Day of Judgement is that of humiliation. They see the suffering awaiting them and their pride crumbles. Subdued, they will meekly ask: "*Is there any way of return?*" It is a question that combines eagerness and despair of any chance to save themselves. They are made to see the fire and they look at it in disgrace and utter humiliation. They cannot lift their eyes; therefore, they cast only a furtive glance.

It will be clear then that the believers are the ones who state the truth: "*The believers will then say: The true losers are the ones who have forfeited themselves and their kindred on this Day of Resurrection.*" (Verse 45) They are the ones who have lost everything, standing there humbly asking for a second chance that will not be given. The final comment on this image explains the outcome for those brought before the fire: "*Indeed the wrongdoers will fall into long-lasting suffering. No protector whatever will they have to help them against God. He whom God lets go astray shall find no way forward.*" (Verses 45–46) No support will be forthcoming as the final word has been said and all ways are sealed.

When Response is Slow Coming

Now the *sūrah* addresses those who stubbornly opposed the Prophet's message with an order to respond to their Lord before such a fate comes upon them, all of a sudden, when they will be without support. A directive to the Prophet is added instructing him to turn away from

them if they persist in their rejection. His task though is only to deliver his message; he is not responsible for anyone:

> *Respond to your Lord before there comes, by God's will, a day that cannot be put off. There shall be no refuge for you on that day, nor shall you be able to deny your sins. If they turn away, We have not sent you to be their keeper. Your only duty is to deliver the message [entrusted to you]. When We give man a taste of Our grace, he rejoices in it, but if misfortune befalls him on account of what he has done with his own hands, he is bereft of gratitude.* (Verses 47–48)

Having made the warning and the directive abundantly clear, these verses portray the nature of the one who opposes the Divine message and stubbornly refuses to submit to its truth. He is fickle, wildly rejoicing when he is granted something of God's grace and panicking in the face of adversity. In such a situation, man often transgresses all bounds and shows no gratitude for what he is given: "*When We give man a taste of Our grace, he rejoices in it, but if misfortune befalls him on account of what he has done with his own hands, he is bereft of gratitude.*" (Verse 48)

By way of comment on this, the *sūrah* makes absolutely clear that whatever happiness or misfortune, affluence or scarcity befalls man is determined by God. It is very strange therefore for someone, who reacts in this way to blessings and misfortune, to turn away from God when He holds all the strings affecting his life:

> *To God belongs sovereignty over the heavens and the earth. He creates what He will. He grants female offspring to whomever He will, and male to whomever He will; or gives both male and female to whomever He will, and causes whomever He will to be barren. He is All-Knowing, infinite in His power.* (Verses 49–50)

Offspring is an aspect of what man is given or denied. It is something very dear to man. Since human nature is very sensitive to procreation, looking at it from this angle is more effective. The *sūrah* spoke earlier of man's provisions and how they are given in plentiful or scant measure.

Offspring is a different aspect of what God provides man with. It is no different from money, however, in the way it is granted.

These verses begin by stating that everything in the heavens and earth belongs to God alone. This introduction fits with every detail that follows this statement of general ownership. The same is true of the succeeding sentence: "*He creates what He will.*" (Verse 49) This emphasizes the effect the verse aims to generate, directing man, who loves every good thing, to turn to God who creates everything that man loves and dislikes.

Further details are given of what God may grant or withhold. He may grant female offspring to anyone. The Arabs addressed for the first time by the Qur'ān used to dislike females. He also grants male children to anyone He chooses. Alternatively, He may give offspring of both kinds to anyone. The fourth situation is that He may deny offspring altogether, making people barren. What is important to remember is that all these situations are determined by God's will. None interferes in His decision which is based on His perfect knowledge and executed by His power: "*He is All-Knowing, infinite in His power.*" (Verse 50)

Methods of Revelation

As it draws to its conclusion, the *sūrah* picks up its main theme again, which is the truth of revelation and message. It now speaks of the nature of this contact between God and His chosen servants and how it is done. It asserts that such contact has actually taken place with the last messenger, Muḥammad (peace be upon him). This last contact has a definite objective God wishes to accomplish, namely, providing guidance along a straight path to whoever chooses to be guided:

> *It is not granted to any human being that God should speak to him except through revelation or from behind a veil, or by sending a messenger to reveal by His command what He will. He is exalted, wise. Thus have We revealed a spirit to you [Muḥammad] by Our command. You knew neither revelation nor faith, but We made it a*

> *light, guiding with it whoever We will of Our servants. You most certainly give guidance to the straight path, the path of God, to whom belongs all that is in the heavens and earth. Most certainly, to God all things shall in the end return.* (Verses 51–53)

The first of these verses makes it abundantly clear that no man is ever spoken to by God face to face. 'Ā'ishah is quoted as saying: "Whoever claims that Muḥammad has seen his Lord is delivering a very grave falsehood." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] God speaks to people in one of three ways. First, by 'revelation', which is given directly and the recipient knows that it comes from God. Secondly, 'from behind a veil', as God spoke to Moses whose request to see God was denied. In fact, he was unable to stand firm when God's glory was revealed to the mountain. The relevant Qur'ānic report states: "*When Moses came for Our appointment and his Lord spoke to him, he said: 'My Lord, show Yourself to me, so that I may look at You.' Said [God]: 'You shall not see Me. But look upon the mountain; if it remains firm in its place, then, only then, you shall see Me.' When his Lord revealed His glory to the mountain, He sent it crashing down. Moses fell down senseless. When he came to himself, he said: 'Limitless You are in Your glory. To You I turn in repentance. I am the first to truly believe in You.'*" (7: 143)

The third form of address is that God sends a messenger, who is an angel, '*to reveal by His command what He will.*' This takes different forms, which the Prophet explained as follows:

1. The angel would impart to him something he recognized within himself, without seeing the angel. The Prophet said: 'The Holy Spirit has imparted to me that no soul will ever die until it has had whatever provisions assigned to it. Therefore, remain God-fearing and moderate your requests.'
2. The angel would come to the Prophet in the form of a man who spoke to him and made sure that he understood what was being said to him.
3. The angel would give him the revelation in a way that sounded like a bell ringing in his ear. This was the hardest form for the

Prophet. He would be perspiring even on a very cold day. If he was riding a camel, his camel would fall to the ground. Once he received revelation in this way when he was seated, with his thigh next to that of Zayd ibn Thābit who felt then that his bone was almost broken.

4. The Prophet would see the angel in the angel's own form, giving him whatever God bid him give. This happened to him twice as mentioned in verses 7 and 13 of *Sūrah* 53, The Star.[8]

Such were the different forms of contact and revelation. "*He is Exalted, Wise.*" (Verse 51) He bestows His revelation from on high, to whomever He chooses, according to His wisdom.

The Nature of Revelation

At this point I have to say that whenever I read a Qur'ānic verse or a statement by the Prophet that mentions revelation, I feel a shudder as I try to think how it happened. How does such contact take place between the One who is eternal, having no defined space in time or place, who encompasses everything and has nothing that bears any resemblance to Him, and an ordinary mortal? And how is such contact then represented in words, sentences and meanings? How can a mortal receive God's eternal word which is totally unlike what we know? How this, and how that? I then say to myself: why should I ask when I cannot imagine things beyond my limited space within the world of mortals? The truth is that this took place and was given a form which I can now recognize within my immediate world.

Yet the shudder remains. Prophethood is something great indeed. Similarly, the moment when an ordinary man receives revelation from on high is indeed very great. My reader, can you feel it with me? Are you, like me, trying to imagine it; imagine this revelation coming from 'there'? Am I saying, there? No! there is no such thing as 'there'. Revelation comes from no place, time, space, direction or situation. It

8. Ibn al-Qayyim, *Zād al-Ma'ād*, Beirut, 1994, Vol. 1, pp. 78–80.

comes from the Absolute, the Infinite, the Eternal, from God Almighty. It is addressed to a mortal: it is true that the recipient is a Prophet and a messenger, but he remains confined to the limited world of mortals. It is such a wonderful and miraculous contact which can only be made a reality by God who alone knows how it becomes reality. My reader, do you appreciate the feelings I am trying to portray in such disjointed sentences? Indeed, I do not know what I am saying about what I experience in the depths of my heart as I try to contemplate this great event, which is miraculous in both nature and form. It took place on numerous occasions during the lifetime of God's messenger. Several people saw some aspects of it with their own eyes.

'Ā'ishah witnessed some of these remarkable moments in the history of mankind. She says about one of them: "The Prophet said to me, ''Ā'ishah! Here is Gabriel presenting his greeting to you.' I said, 'Peace be to him, together with God's mercy.' The Prophet was seeing what we could not see." [Related by al-Bukhārī.] Zayd ibn Thābit also witnessed such a great moment as stated earlier. Other companions of the Prophet saw it on many occasions, recognizing the fact as they looked at the Prophet. They left him alone to receive whatever he received. When it was over, he was with them just as he was before.

Then, what sort of special nature distinguishes the human soul that makes this contact with the sublime? What is the element within the human soul that enables it to be the recipient of revelation from on high? This is yet another issue. In what way did the Prophet's soul, which is a human soul, feel this contact and how did it open its receptive faculties to revelation? How did it feel the universe in those moments when God opened His glory to it, with His words resounding in its every corner?

What care, what grace, what honour are bestowed on man, such a small creature, when God in His glory confers on him what enlightens his way ahead and keeps him on the right track? Such honour appears great indeed when we remember that, compared to God's kingdom, man looks more insignificant than a mosquito compared to man.

Revelation is indeed a reality, but a sublime one. It appears to rise to a high and distant horizon which our faculties can hardly perceive.

The Guiding Light

> *Thus have We revealed a spirit to you [Muḥammad] by Our command. You knew neither revelation nor faith, but We made it a light, guiding with it whoever We will of Our servants. You most certainly give guidance to the straight path, the path of God, to whom belongs all that is in the heavens and earth. Most certainly, to God all things shall in the end return.* (Verses 52–53)

It was by means of such contact that revelation was given to the Prophet: "*Thus have We revealed a spirit to you [Muḥammad] by Our command.*" (Verse 52) The process was the same as revelation granted to earlier messengers, bringing to the Prophet a '*spirit*' that gives life to souls, motivating them to act and implement the Divine message. "*You knew neither revelation nor faith.*" (Verse 52) The Qur'ān describes the Prophet's soul prior to revelation in this way. The Prophet had heard of revelation and faith before, because the Arabs were aware of other communities that had scriptures and believed in a well-defined faith. It is not the mere knowledge of such matters that this statement refers to. The reference here is to how revelation affected the Prophet's heart and conscience and how he interacted with it. He certainly experienced nothing of this before this spirit was revealed to him by God's command.

"*But We made it a light, guiding with it whoever We will of Our servants.*" (Verse 52) This is the total nature of the message given through this revelation. It is a light that imparts happiness to those hearts that are guided by it. "*You most certainly give guidance to the straight path, the path of God.*" (Verses 52–53) Special emphasis is placed here on relating guidance to God's will, making it clear that He alone grants it only to whom He will on the basis of His own knowledge, shared with no one else. The Prophet is only the means chosen to fulfil God's will. He does not initiate guidance in people's hearts. He only delivers God's message which opens the way to the fulfilment of God's will.

"*You most certainly give guidance to the straight path, the path of God, to whom belongs all that is in the heavens and earth.*" (Verses 52–53) Guidance shows us the path of God, at which point all ways converge, because it leads to the Sovereign who alone has dominion over the

heavens and the earth. Whoever is guided to His path is certain to know the laws that God has set in operation in the universe, bringing their forces into play and providing sustenance to all. Hence, the whole universe turns to its Supreme Owner to whom all shall return: "*Most certainly, to God all things shall in the end return.*" (Verse 53) He will then judge them all. Such is the light God has given so that people will go along the way He has chosen for them; they will return to Him having obeyed His command and benefited by His guidance.

Thus the *sūrah* is brought to its conclusion. It began with a discussion of revelation, which provided its main theme. It stated that revelation started with the early prophets, making it clear that Divine religion is one, outlining the same code and showing the same way. It gives humanity its new leadership represented by the person of Muḥammad (peace be upon him), and in the community that believes in his message. This community is entrusted with the task of guiding people to the straight path leading to God. The *sūrah* also outlines the characteristics of this community which qualify it to provide sound leadership. It is this community that shoulders the trust bestowed from on high by the sublime process of revelation.

SŪRAH 43

Al-Zukhruf

(Gold)

Prologue

This *sūrah* presents a detailed picture of what the Islamic message faced of problems, arguments and objections. It also shows how the Qur'ān dealt with these and their effects on people, establishing at the same time its own truth in place of old, false, ignorant superstitions and values that had taken hold of people's minds at the time. In fact, some people, everywhere, continue to hold elements of these as valid.

Followers of pagan beliefs used to claim that the cattle God has created for the benefit of mankind are divided between God and their own alleged deities: "*Out of the produce and the cattle He has created, they assign a portion to God, saying: 'This is for God' – or so they pretend – 'and this is for the partners we associate [with Him]'. Whatever they assign to their partners never reaches God, but that which is assigned to God does reach their partners.*" (6: 136) In fact, they believed in many legends and superstitions concerning cattle, and these were all the result of deviant practices. In this way, they claimed that they were forbidden to ride some animals, while others were considered unlawful to eat: "*They say: 'Such cattle and crops are forbidden. None may eat of them save those whom we permit' – so they falsely claim. Other cattle they declare to be forbidden to burden their backs; and there are cattle over which they do not pronounce God's name, inventing [in all this] a lie against Him.*" (6: 138)

This *sūrah* discusses such deviant beliefs putting forward the original truth and demonstrating that cattle are God's creatures, representing an aspect of life that is closely related to the creation of the heavens and the earth. God has made cattle subservient to man so that people can express their gratitude and give thanks to Him for such a blessing. They must neither attribute false partners to Him nor enact for themselves legislation that is at variance with what pleases God, when they recognize Him as the Creator. How absurd that they discard the natural result of this truth, which they acknowledge, allowing superstition to get the better of them: "*Yet if you ask them, 'Who created the heavens and the earth?' they are sure to answer, 'The Almighty, the All-Knowing created them.' It is He who has smoothed out the earth for you and has traced on it paths for you so that you can find your way. And He it is who sends down water from the sky in due measure. With it We raise dead land to life; and thus you will be raised from the dead. And He it is who created all living things in pairs, and provided for you the ships and animals on which you ride, so that when you are seated on their backs you remember your Lord's blessings and say: 'Limitless in His glory is He who has made all this subservient to our use. We could not have done it by ourselves. To our Lord we shall most certainly return.*" (Verses 9–14)

Ignorant paganism used to claim that angels were God's daughters. Although they hated daughters being born to themselves, they nonetheless attributed daughters to God and worshipped these instead of Him. They alleged that they worshipped them by God's will. Had He willed otherwise, they would not have worshipped them. Again, this was nothing but a legend arising from deviant beliefs.

The *sūrah* uses the unbelievers' own logic as well as the logic of sound human nature to refute this baseless legend: "*Yet they assign to Him some of His own servants as offspring. Surely man is clearly bereft of all gratitude. Would He, out of all His creation, choose for Himself daughters and favour you with sons? If any of them is given the good news of the birth of what he so readily attributes to the Lord of Grace, his face darkens and he is filled with gloom. [Would they ascribe to God] someone who is brought up among trinkets and cannot put together a clear argument? They claim that the angels, who are themselves but servants of the Lord of Grace, are females! Did they witness their creation? Their testimony will be put on record and they will be questioned about it. They say: 'Had it been the will of the*

Lord of Grace, we should never have worshipped them.' Of that they have no knowledge: they are blatantly lying. Or have We given them a book before this one to which they are still holding fast? No indeed! They say, 'We found our forefathers following this tradition and we find our guidance by following in their footsteps.' (Verses 15–22)

When they were told that they were only worshipping statues, idols and trees, and that everyone who worships anything other than God will be thrown into hell together with the object of their worship, they twisted this clear statement making it a subject of dispute. They referred to Jesus, pointing out that his followers worshipped him. So would he be thrown into hell? They also argued that the idols represented angels who were God's daughters. Therefore, they postulated, "we are better worshipping them than the Christians who worship Jesus, a mere human being." The *sūrah* exposes such twisted logic, absolving Jesus of what the Christians perpetrated after his time, since he did not sanction anything of the sort: "*Whenever the son of Mary is cited as an example, your people raise an outcry, saying: 'Who is better: our deities or he?' They cite him only to challenge you. They are contentious people. He was but a servant of Ours whom We had favoured and made an example to the Children of Israel.*" (Verses 57–59)

They also claimed that they followed Abraham's faith and, as such, were best guided, yet all the while they were immersed in pagan ignorance. The *sūrah* outlines the true nature of Abraham's faith, based on God's absolute oneness. This principle continued and will continue among Abraham's descendants. Muḥammad, God's messenger, came to them with the same principle, but they received him with other than what Abraham's offspring should give: "*Abraham said to his father and his people: 'I renounce what you worship, I worship none other than Him who brought me into being. It is He who will guide me.' He made this an abiding precept among his descendants so that they might always return [to God]. I have allowed these people and their forefathers to enjoy their lives freely until the truth has come to them through a messenger who makes things clear. Now that the truth has come to them, they say, 'This is all sorcery, and we reject it outright.'*" (Verses 26–30)

They could not understand God's wisdom in choosing His messenger. Their earthly values, the basis of the status they assigned to people, contributed to their unwillingness to accept him. The *sūrah*

reports what they said in this respect, presenting the true values that should be upheld in comparison to their trivial ones: "*They also say, 'Why was not this Qur'ān revealed to some great man of the two cities?' Is it they who apportion your Lord's grace? It is We who deal out to them their livelihood in the life of this world, and raise some in rank above others, so that some of them may take others into their service. Your Lord's grace is better than all that they can amass. Were it not that all people would become one community [of unbelievers], We would have provided those who now disbelieve in the Lord of Grace with roofs of silver for houses, stairways on which to ascend, gates, couches on which to recline, and gold ornaments. Yet all this would have been nothing but the fleeting enjoyment of life in this world. It is the life to come that your Lord reserves for the God-fearing.*" (Verses 31–35)

The *sūrah* then recounts an episode from Moses' life history, one that reflects Pharaoh's similarly false values. This account demonstrates how both these values and Pharaoh himself were unworthy. It tells us of the fate that awaits him and all those with similar attitudes: "*We sent Moses with Our message to Pharaoh and his nobles; and he said: 'I am a messenger of the Lord of all the worlds,' but when he presented Our signs to them, they laughed at them, yet each sign We showed them was greater than the preceding one. We put them through suffering so that they might return [to the right path]. They said: 'Sorcerer, pray to your Lord for us on the strength of the covenant He has made with you. We shall now follow the right way.' Yet when We removed their suffering they still broke their word. Pharaoh proclaimed to his people, saying: 'My people, is the kingdom of Egypt not mine, with all these rivers flowing at my feet? Do you not see? Am I not better than this contemptible wretch who can hardly make his meaning clear? Why have no bracelets of gold been given to him? Why have no angels come to accompany him?' Thus did he make fools of his people, and they obeyed him. They were people lost in evil. When they incurred Our anger, We inflicted Our retribution on them and drowned them all; and so We made them a thing of the past and an example for later generations.*" (Verses 46–56)

I

Ignorance Based on Superstition

Al-Zukhruf (Gold)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

Ḥā. Mīm. (1)

By the Book that makes things clear! (2)

We have made the Qur'ān a discourse in Arabic so that you may understand. (3)

It originates in the source of revelation kept with Us; it is indeed sublime, full of wisdom. (4)

Should We ignore you and take away this reminder from you because you are people who transgress beyond bounds? (5)

Many a prophet did We send to people of olden times; (6)

وَكَمْ أَرْسَلْنَا مِن نَّبِيٍّ فِي الْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿٦﴾

but they mocked at each prophet who came to them. (7)

وَمَا يَأْتِيهِم مِّن نَّبِيٍّ إِلَّا كَانُوا بِهِۦ
يَسْتَهْزِءُونَ ﴿٧﴾

We destroyed them even though they were mightier than these. Thus their example has gone down in history. (8)

فَأَهْلَكْنَا أَشَدَّ مِنْهُم بَطْشًا وَمَضَىٰ
مَثَلُ الْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿٨﴾

Yet if you ask them, 'Who created the heavens and the earth?' they are sure to answer, 'The Almighty, the All-Knowing created them.' (9)

وَلَئِن سَأَلْتَهُم مَّنْ خَلَقَ السَّمَٰوَٰتِ
وَالْأَرْضَ لَيَقُولُنَّ خَلَقَهُنَّ الْعَزِيزُ
الْعَلِيمُ ﴿٩﴾

It is He who has smoothed out the earth for you and has traced on it paths for you so that you can find your way. (10)

الَّذِي جَعَلَ لَكُمُ الْأَرْضَ مَهْدًا
وَجَعَلَ لَكُمْ فِيهَا سُبُلًا لَّعَلَّكُمْ
تَهْتَدُونَ ﴿١٠﴾

And He it is who sends down water from the sky in due measure. With it We raise dead land to life; and thus you will be raised from the dead. (11)

وَالَّذِي نَزَّلَ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ مَاءً بِقَدَرٍ
فَأَنشَرْنَا بِهِۦ بَلْدَةً مَّيْتًا ۚ كَذَٰلِكَ
تُخْرَجُونَ ﴿١١﴾

And He it is who created all living things in pairs, and provided for you the ships and animals on which you ride, (12)

وَالَّذِي خَلَقَ الْأَزْوَٰجَ كُلَّهَا وَجَعَلَ
لَكُم مِّنَ الْفُلْكِ وَالْأَنْعَٰمِ
مَا تَرْكَبُونَ ﴿١٢﴾

so that when you are seated on their backs you remember your Lord's blessings and say: 'Limitless in His glory is He who has made all this subservient to our use. We could not have done it by ourselves. (13)

لِتَسْتَوُۥا عَلَىٰ ظُهُورِهِۦ ثُمَّ تَذْكُرُوا نِعْمَةَ رَبِّكُمْ إِذَا ٱسْتَوَيْتُمْ عَلَيْهِ وَتَقُولُوا سُبْحَٰنَ ٱلَّذِى سَخَّرَ لَنَا هَٰذَا وَمَا كُنَّا لَهُۥ مُقْرِنِينَ ﴿١٣﴾

To our Lord we shall most certainly return.' (14)

وَإِنَّآ إِلَىٰ رَبِّنَا لَمُنقَلِبُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

Yet they assign to Him some of His own servants as offspring. Surely man is clearly bereft of all gratitude. (15)

وَجَعَلُوا لَهُۥ مِنْ عِبَادِهِۦ جُزْءًا ۚ إِنَّ ٱلْإِنسَٰنَ لَكَفُورٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿١٥﴾

Would He, out of all His creation, choose for Himself daughters and favour you with sons? (16)

أَمِ ٱتَّخَذَ مِمَّا يَخْلُقُ بَنَاتٍ وَأَصْفَىٰكُم بِٱلْبَنِينَ ﴿١٦﴾

If any of them is given the good news of the birth of what he so readily attributes to the Lord of Grace, his face darkens and he is filled with gloom. (17)

وَإِذَا بُشِّرَ أَحَدُهُم بِمَا ضَرَبَ لِلرَّحْمَٰنِ مَثَلًا ظَلَّ وَجْهُهُۥ مُسْوَدًّا وَهُوَ كَظِيمٌ ﴿١٧﴾

[Would they ascribe to God] someone who is brought up among trinkets and cannot put together a clear argument? (18)

أَوَمَن يُنَشَّؤُا فِى ٱلْحِلْيَةِ وَهُوَ فِى ٱلْخِصَامِ غَيْرُ مُبِينٍ ﴿١٨﴾

They claim that the angels, who are themselves but servants of the Lord of Grace, are females! Did they witness their creation? Their testimony will be put on record and they will be questioned about it. (19)

وَجَعَلُوا۟ ٱلْمَلَٰٓئِكَةَ ٱلَّذِينَ هُمْ
عِبَٰدُ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ إِنَٰثًا ۚ أَشَهِدُوا۟
خَلْقَهُمْ ۚ سَتُكْتَبُ شَهَٰدَتُهُمْ
وَيُسْـَٔلُونَ ﴿١٩﴾

They say: ‘Had it been the will of the Lord of Grace, we should never have worshipped them.’ Of that they have no knowledge: they are blatantly lying. (20)

وَقَالُوا۟ لَوْ شَآءَ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنُ مَا عَبَدْنَٰهُم ۗ
مَّا لَهُم بِذَٰلِكَ مِنْ عِلْمٍ ۖ إِنْ هُمْ
إِلَّا يَخْرُصُونَ ﴿٢٠﴾

Or have We given them a book before this one to which they are still holding fast? (21)

أَمْ ءَاتَيْنَٰهُمْ كِتَٰبًا مِّن قَبْلِهِۦ فَهُم
بِهِۦ مُسْتَمْسِكُونَ ﴿٢١﴾

No indeed! They say, ‘We found our forefathers following this tradition and we find our guidance by following in their footsteps.’ (22)

بَلْ قَالُوٓا۟ إِنَّا وَجَدْنَآ ءَابَآءَنَا عَلَىٰٓ أُمَّةٍ
وَإِنَّا عَلَىٰٓ ءَاثَٰرِهِم مُّهْتَدُونَ ﴿٢٢﴾

And thus it is: whenever, before your time, We sent a messenger to any community, the wealthy among them said: ‘We found our forefathers following this tradition and we are only following in their footsteps.’ (23)

وَكَذَٰلِكَ مَآ أَرْسَلْنَا مِن قَبْلِكَ فِى
قَرْيَةٍ مِّن نَّذِيرٍ إِلَّا قَالَ مُتْرَفُوهَآ
إِنَّا وَجَدْنَآ ءَابَآءَنَا عَلَىٰٓ أُمَّةٍ وَإِنَّا
عَلَىٰٓ ءَاثَٰرِهِم مُّقْتَدُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

He said: 'Even though I bring you a guidance better than what you saw your forefathers following?' They replied: 'We reject the message you have been sent with.' (24)

قَٰلَ أَوَلَوْ جِئْتُكُم بِأَهْدَىٰ مِمَّا وَجَدتُّمْ عَلَيْهِ ءَابَآءَكُمْ ۖ قَالُوٓا۟ إِنَّا بِمَآ أُرْسِلْتُم بِهِۦ كَٰفِرُونَ ﴿٢٤﴾

Therefore, We inflicted Our retribution on them. Reflect on how those who rejected the truth met their end. (25)

فَٱنتَقَمْنَا مِنْهُمْ ۖ فَٱنظُرْ كَيْفَ كَانَ عَٰقِبَةُ ٱلْمُكَذِّبِينَ ﴿٢٥﴾

An Address to the Mind

The *sūrah* begins with the two separate letters *Ḥā* and *Mīm* which are then followed by an oath by the book that makes things clear. Both the letters and the book are of the same nature: in its spoken form, the book is of the same type as the letters. Just like all letters in human language, the two letters, or sounds, are of God's signs: it is He who created people and gave them the sounds of their languages. When such letters are mentioned, they carry more than a single meaning with reference to the Qur'ān.

God states this oath by the two letters and the clear book so as to confirm the purpose of making this Qur'ān in the form it was made when revealed to the Arabs: "*We have made the Qur'ān a discourse in Arabic so that you may understand.*" (Verse 3) The purpose, then, is that they should understand it as it is composed in their own tongue. The Qur'ān is God's revelation which He has made, in its spoken form, Arabic as He chose the Arabs to be the bearers of His message. We explained this purpose partly in commenting on the previous *sūrah*. Moreover, God made His choice on the basis of His knowledge that the Arabs were suitable message-bearers and that their language could best express it. God knows whom to entrust with His message.

He then defines what position He has assigned for the Qur'ān with Him and its value in His overall plan for the universe: "*It originates in*

the source of revelation kept with Us; it is indeed sublime, full of wisdom." (Verse 4) We will only in passing refer to the literal meaning of the phrase *Umm al-Kitāb*, translated here as 'the source of revelation'. Does it refer to the 'imperishable tablet'[1] mentioned elsewhere in the Qur'ān, or to God's eternal knowledge? Both are the same in the sense that they do not have a specific meaning within our sphere of knowledge. Yet the verse transmits a definite impression that the Qur'ān has an especially high value in God's overall knowledge and planning. This is enough for us. The Qur'ān is '*sublime*', and '*full of wisdom*'. These two qualities give it a specific rationality, and indeed it is so! It is as if the Qur'ān has a soul of its own, with special features and qualities, that respond to the souls of those who interact with it. With its sublime position and wisdom, it provides guidance to humanity, leading it according to its own nature and qualities, imparting to its rational understanding and to its life values, concepts and facts that are also sublime and bear wisdom.

When this fact has been established it makes the people who speak the language in which the Qur'ān has been revealed appreciate the great gift and blessing God has given them. It shows them the extent of their transgression when they turn away from it in disdain. It is they who deserve to be treated with contempt. Therefore, they are told that they may well be ignored because of their transgression: "*Should We ignore you and take away this reminder from you because you are people who transgress beyond bounds?*" (Verse 5)

It is indeed most remarkable that God, in His glory and sublimity, should care for such people, revealing to them a book in their own tongue, telling them about what they feel, explaining the inner aspects of their lives, showing them the path delineated by His guidance, relating to them accounts of earlier communities and reminding them of God's law that was in effect during ancient times. Yet they continue to ignore His guidance, turning away from it. For God to say that they will be deprived of His care and be ignored for their transgression sounds dreadful.

1. Verse 22 of *Sūrah* 85.

In addition to this threat, they are reminded of God's law that applied to earlier communities that denied the prophets sent to them: "*Many a prophet did We send to people of olden times; but they mocked at each prophet who came to them. We destroyed them even though they were mightier than these. Thus their example has gone down in history.*" (Verses 6–8) What can they expect when God has already destroyed people that were much mightier than they because of their derision of the messengers sent to them?

The Almighty Creator

Amazingly, although the Arabs recognized that God was the Creator of the heavens and the earth, they did not follow this through to its logical conclusion, declaring His oneness and address all worship to Him. On the contrary, they attributed partners to Him, assigning to these some of the cattle He has created. They also alleged that the angels were God's daughters whom they worshipped in the form of idols. The Qur'ān reports their acknowledgement of God's creation, puts before them the logic of human nature which they discard, and outlines the behaviour they should adopt in response to His blessings, particularly ships and cattle. It then describes what they claim about the angels:

> *Yet if you ask them, 'Who created the heavens and the earth?' they are sure to answer, 'The Almighty, the All-Knowing created them.' It is He who has smoothed out the earth for you and has traced on it paths for you so that you can find your way. And He it is who sends down water from the sky in due measure. With it We raise dead land to life; and thus you will be raised from the dead. And He it is who created all living things in pairs, and provided for you the ships and animals on which you ride, so that when you are seated on their backs you remember your Lord's blessings and say: 'Limitless in His glory is He who has made all this subservient to our use. We could not have done it by ourselves. To our Lord we shall most certainly return.* (Verses 9–14)

The Arabs had a faith, which we can imagine as consisting of remnants of the original pure faith of Abraham, that had lost its original shining colours, intermingled with legends. What remained was something that human nature could not deny, namely that the universe has a Creator who is God: the universe could not have existed without a Creator and the Creator could only be God. Yet, the Arabs did not take this natural truth to its logical conclusion; they simply stopped at the bare fact: "*Yet if you ask them, 'Who created the heavens and the earth?' they are sure to answer, 'The Almighty, the All-Knowing created them.'*" (Verse 9)

It is obvious that they did not verbalize God's two attributes: the Almighty and the All-Knowing. They acknowledged that it was God who created the universe, but they did not know God according to His attributes detailed in the Islamic faith. These are positive attributes that produce a clear effect on people's lives and the life of the universe. They admitted that God created them and the universe, but they also alleged that He had partners because they did not know God's attributes that would have made the very concept of partnership with Him appear absurd. The Qur'ān tells them now that the Creator they acknowledge is the One who is Almighty and who knows all.

The *sūrah* takes them another step forward in outlining God's attributes and the favours He has given them: "*It is He who has smoothed out the earth for you and has traced on it paths for you so that you can find your way.*" (Verse 10) Smoothing out the earth is a fact understood, in one way or another, by everyone. The people who were the first to be addressed by the Qur'ān would have seen the earth smooth under their feet when they walked, ready for plants to grow. It is smoothed out generally for life to grow. However, we realize this today in a more profound way, taking into account what we have learnt about the nature of the earth and its history. Future generations will understand this fact in an even greater way; human knowledge will continue to expand and discover new facts that have so far remained unknown.

Today, we understand that smoothing out the earth so as to enable the human race to survive on it and find ways and paths to ensure life progresses is a complex multi-faceted process. In fact, this planet has gone through a number of different stages that have allowed its surface

to change from a hard rocky one to plant-supporting soil. Water has been formed from oxygen and hydrogen. Its rotation speed has slowed down to ensure that it has moderate temperatures throughout its day and so as to allow objects to remain stable on its surface. Moreover, a proper measure of gravity has been placed on it to ensure that its atmosphere remains sufficiently stable to support life. Without such an atmosphere life cannot be sustained, as is the case on other planets with a gravity too weak to ensure stability. Moreover, the earth's gravity has been made equal to movement and this equilibrium has protected objects and living things from being blown away, while at the same time allowing man and other living things to move on the surface of the earth. Had gravity increased above this sustainable level, all objects and living creatures would have been stuck to the earth and their movements would have become very hard or even impossible. Furthermore, air pressure would have increased so as to bind them firmly to the earth or crush them against it, just as we sometimes crush flies and mosquitoes with a strike that does not bring our hands into contact with them but rather increases the air pressure around them. By contrast, should air pressure decrease, our veins and breasts may burst.

The smoothing of the earth to make it life supporting also refers to the fact that the Almighty, All-Knowing Creator has brought about numerous balances which together facilitate human life on earth. Had any of these been disturbed, life would have become very difficult, even impossible. We have already mentioned some of these. We may, however, refer to the fact that the great amount of water that covers much of the earth's surface purges its atmosphere of much of the poisonous gases that result from the infinite number of interactions that take place all the time. Thus, its atmosphere remains life supporting. Plants also ensure that a proper balance is maintained between the oxygen living creatures breathe in and the oxygen breathed out during the process of assimilation plants perform. Unless this balance is maintained, all living things would have suffocated in a very short period of time.

Indeed the significance of the Qur'ānic statement, '*It is He who has smoothed out the earth for you and has traced on it paths for you,*' grows

wider every day. Every new addition to its significance testifies to both God's might and knowledge. We see God's able hand wherever we look and however far our imagination roams. It tells man that his life is not the result of blind coincidence nor has he been abandoned. Indeed, God's hand defines man's every step before, during and after his life on earth.

"*So that you can find your way.*" (Verse 10) Reflection on what the universe contains and its natural laws inevitably leads the human mind to recognition of its Creator who established such accurate and perfectly harmonious systems.

Blessings of Every Type

The *sūrah* then looks a step further at the process of life and the emergence of living creatures: "*And He it is who sends down water from the sky in due measure. With it We raise dead land to life; and thus you will be raised from the dead.*" (Verse 11) Water comes down from the skies, as every person sees and knows, but most people are not moved by this remarkable phenomenon because of over familiarity. Muḥammad, God's messenger, (peace be upon him), however, held a different attitude. He looked at the drops of rain with love and welcoming delight, knowing that they came from God; in other words, his heart recognized God's handiwork in these drops. Every heart that is aware of its bond with God and the laws of nature He has set in operation should adopt this attitude. Every raindrop is the result of these laws of nature which operate under God's eye and control. That rain originates from the vapour that rises from the earth and cools down in the atmosphere in no way diminishes the implication of these facts. Who has brought the earth into being, placed water on it, subjected it to heat, made water naturally evaporate and vapour rise and condense? Who has given the universe its other characteristics which give the condensing vapour an electrical charge so that when clouds gather, their electric charges cause rain to fall? Besides, what is electricity? What are these other characteristics that produce the combined effect of rain falling down? As we learn more about nature, however, our knowledge casts a heavy weight over our understanding. We no longer

appreciate the messages given by universal phenomena; we no longer allow these messages to refine our feelings and responses.

"*And He it is who sends down water from the sky in due measure.*" (Verse 11) It is given in the right quantity, neither too much so as to flood large areas of land, nor too little to leave the land barren. Man has come to recognize the importance of maintaining this fine balance for the continuity of life. "*With it We raise dead land to life.*" Life on earth flourishes where water is plentiful. It is from water that every living thing originates. "*And thus you will be raised from the dead.*" (Verse 11) The One who originated life in the first place will bring it back again. It is He who started life in a land that was dead, and He will raise all back to life on the Day of Resurrection. Nothing is difficult for Him.

We learn from this *sūrah* that the Arab unbelievers used to assign a portion of their cattle to God and another portion to other beings. God, however, created cattle as one of the favours He bestows on man: people ride cattle as they ride on ships and they should appreciate His blessings and give thanks: "*And He it is who created all living things in pairs, and provided for you the ships and animals on which you ride, so that when you are seated on their backs you remember your Lord's blessings and say: 'Limitless in His glory is He who has made all this subservient to our use. We could not have done it by ourselves. To our Lord we shall most certainly return.*" (Verses 12–14)

Making things in pairs is a rule of life, as indicated in this verse. All living things are created in pairs; even the first living cell carries masculine and feminine characteristics. In fact, this rule perhaps applies to the universe in its entirety, if we consider its basic unit to be the atom which consists of a negative electron and a positive proton, as all research in physics has so far indicated. Be that as it may, this duality is apparent throughout life. It is God who has created all pairs, human and non-human.

Moreover, it is He who has "*provided for you the ships and animals on which you ride.*" (Verse 12) This is to remind man that God has placed him in charge of the earth, putting at his disposal its considerable and varied power and potential. It also invites man to show gratitude for God's choice and blessings, reminds him of the One who grants

blessings every time such a blessing is enjoyed. Such expressions of gratitude for God's blessings is sure to keep our hearts alive to their bond with God at every turn in life: "*So that when you are seated on their backs you remember your Lord's blessings and say: 'Limitless in His glory is He who has made all this subservient to our use. We could not have done it by ourselves.*" (Verse 13) We certainly cannot match His blessings. All that we can do is to be truly grateful and give due thanks for all that He has favoured us with. We should realize that we will eventually return to God after our term in charge of the earth comes to its end. He will then requite us for what we have done in life when we enjoyed His favours and what He placed at our service: "*To our Lord we shall most certainly return.*" (Verse 14) Such are the refined manners people should adopt towards God who has granted us countless favours and blessings. Yet we tend to forget Him even when we are enjoying His favours. Hence, this gentle reminder.

These Islamic manners closely relate to the cultivation of the human conscience and people's education. This is not a mere ritual or empty phrase we say when mounting cattle or riding on ships and other means of transport. It is a deliberate action that aims to alert our feelings so that we are fully aware of the bond between God and His creatures. Furthermore, His blessings are granted to us freely; we cannot repay God in any way for any of His countless blessings. Hence, we should always remain in awe of Him, thinking of the day when we will meet Him and submit our account of what we did in life. Thus we should always remain conscious of God, aware that He is watching over us.

An Absurd Superstition

The *sūrah* then refers to the absurd legend that makes deities of angels, alleging that they are God's daughters when they are no more than a different type of creature:

> *Yet they assign to Him some of His own servants as offspring. Surely man is clearly bereft of all gratitude. Would He, out of all His creation, choose for Himself daughters and favour you with sons? If any of them i. given the good news of the birth of what he so readily*

> *attributes to the Lord of Grace, his face darkens and he is filled with gloom. [Would they ascribe to God] someone who is brought up among trinkets and cannot put together a clear argument? They claim that the angels, who are themselves but servants of the Lord of Grace, are females! Did they witness their creation? Their testimony will be put on record and they will be questioned about it. They say: 'Had it been the will of the Lord of Grace, we should never have worshipped them.' Of that they have no knowledge: they are blatantly lying. Or have We given them a book before this one to which they are still holding fast? No indeed! They say, 'We found our forefathers following this tradition and we find our guidance by following in their footsteps.' And thus it is: whenever, before your time, We sent a messenger to any community, the wealthy among them said: 'We found our forefathers following this tradition and we are only following in their footsteps.' He said: 'Even though I bring you a guidance better than what you saw your forefathers following?' They replied: 'We reject the message you have been sent with.' Therefore, We inflicted Our retribution on them. Reflect on how those who rejected the truth met their end.* (Verses 15–25)

The *sūrah* addresses every aspect of this superstition, leaving no loophole unclosed. Throughout, the *sūrah* uses the unbelievers' own logic and draws on their own life situations. It places before them the fate of earlier communities that adopted a similar stand to theirs, making almost identical allegations. It begins by highlighting the absurdity of this superstition and what it means of blatant rejection of the truth: "*Yet they assign to Him some of His own servants as offspring. Surely man is clearly bereft of all gratitude.*" (Verse 15) The angels are God's servants. To allege that they are God's offspring means that they are not His servants, but instead have a special relationship with Him. Since they are God's servants, to give them any special relation to their Creator is meaningless. All God's creatures are His servants. Such a claim, thus, brands man as a clear unbeliever: "*Surely man is clearly bereft of all gratitude.*" (Verse 15)

Using their own logic and standards, the *sūrah* ridicules their allegation that the angels are female and then their claim that they are

God's offspring: "*Would He, out of all His creation, choose for Himself daughters and favour you with sons?*" (Verse 16) If God were to take offspring for Himself, why would He choose females and give the males to them? This is nothing less than absurd and especially when they are so distressed when a daughter is born to them. "*If any of them is given the good news of the birth of what he so readily attributes to the Lord of Grace, his face darkens and he is filled with gloom.*" (Verse 17)

What sort of manners are these that make them attribute to God what would fill them with gloom? Indeed, they would be so distressed about parenting a daughter that they could not even face speaking about it. In their environment, it was only brave men who could fight hard in battle that were looked upon with esteem. How come, then, that they assign to God offspring of the type which only cares about jewellery and fine things, unable to refute an argument or fight a case? "*[Would they ascribe to God] someone who is brought up among trinkets and cannot put together a clear argument?*" (Verse 18) Here we see how the *sūrah* uses their own logic, making them ashamed of attributing to God what they themselves hate to father. Should they not, if at all, have attributed to Him what scores highly in their own estimation?

The *sūrah* then refutes another of their absurd superstitions. They alleged that the angels were female. On what basis do they make such a claim? "*They claim that the angels, who are themselves but servants of the Lord of Grace, are females! Did they witness their creation? Their testimony will be put on record and they will be questioned about it.*" (Verse 19) Were they present when the angels were created so as to know that they were female? Had they seen their creation, they would have had reliable evidence. They certainly cannot claim to have been present at the time, yet still they make this ridiculous assertion. Therefore, they will be made responsible for claiming what they have no evidence to prove: "*Their testimony will be put on record and they will be questioned about it.*" (Verse 19)

The unbelievers provide further argument to justify their absurdities, but once again the *sūrah* exposes how flawed their statements are: "*They say: 'Had it been the will of the Lord of Grace, we should never have worshipped them.' Of that they have no knowledge: they are blatantly*

lying." (Verse 20) When they are faced with irrefutable argument based on solid evidence, they justify their action by claiming that it is God's will. They allege that God accepts their worship of angels. Had He not been pleased with this, He would have prevented them from such worship! How devious! It is true that everything in the universe occurs by God's will. Yet it is also God's will that man has been given the ability to choose for himself which way to follow: true guidance or error. God has also required man to choose His guidance and follow it, telling man that this is the choice He will be pleased with. He is not pleased when man chooses error and disbelief, even though He has enabled him to do so.

When they attribute their own choice to God's will, this is nothing less than wild conjecture. They cannot be certain that God wants them to worship the angels. How can they achieve such certainty? "*Of that they have no knowledge: they are blatantly lying.*" (Verse 20) They simply indulge in guesswork and delusion. "*Or have We given them a book before this one to which they are still holding fast?*" (Verse 21) Do they have such a book as a basis for their claims, giving them clear evidence in support of their worship?

Thus we see how the *sūrah* closes in on them, refuting every argument they make, and clearly indicating that faith cannot be based on guesswork or unsupported claims. Faith can only be based on a revealed book to which people should adhere.

At this point, the *sūrah* exposes the reality on which they rely when holding to their absurd superstition that makes them offer false worship: "*No indeed! They say, 'We found our forefathers following this tradition and we find our guidance by following in their footsteps.'*" (Verse 22) This is a ludicrous and baseless argument. It shows them to be content to follow their ancestors without thinking about or looking into the basis of their actions. Thus, they are no more than a herd of cattle driven to where it does not know. They are totally unaware of their destination or whether they are following the road leading to it.

Being a message that seeks to free the human mind of all shackles, Islam rejects such abject following in the footsteps of ancestors. Every action should be determined on the basis of deliberate thinking and conscious choice.

At the end of this passage, the unbelievers are shown the fates of earlier communities that argued in the same vein and blindly followed their forefathers' footsteps, rejecting the truth clearly presented to them by God's messengers: "*And thus it is: whenever, before your time, We sent a messenger to any community, the wealthy among them said: 'We found our forefathers following this tradition and we are only following in their footsteps.' He said: 'Even though I bring you a guidance better than what you saw your forefathers following?' They replied: 'We reject the message you have been sent with.' Therefore, We inflicted Our retribution on them. Reflect on how those who rejected the truth met their end.*" (Verses 23–25)

Thus we see that those who turn away from Divine guidance are of a similar nature and use the same arguments. They are blind to everything other than following in their forefathers' footsteps. They close their minds to any new evidence, rejecting any new way even though it may be better, rely on solid argument and bring better results. Such a persistently deviant nature, which will not open its eyes or mind to the truth, deserves nothing but destruction. Such is the fate put before the unbelievers so that, perchance, they will take heed.

2

Blindness Out of Choice

Abraham said to his father and his people: 'I renounce what you worship, (26)

وَإِذْ قَالَ إِبْرَٰهِيمُ لِأَبِيهِ وَقَوْمِهِۦٓ
إِنَّنِى بَرَآءٌ مِّمَّا تَعْبُدُونَ ﴿٢٦﴾

I worship none other than Him who brought me into being. It is He who will guide me.' (27)

إِلَّا ٱلَّذِى فَطَرَنِى فَإِنَّهُۥ سَيَهْدِينِ ﴿٢٧﴾

He made this an abiding precept among his descendants so that they might always return [to God]. (28)

وَجَعَلَهَا كَلِمَةًۢ بَاقِيَةً فِى عَقِبِهِۦ
لَعَلَّهُمْ يَرْجِعُونَ ﴿٢٨﴾

I have allowed these people and their forefathers to enjoy their lives freely until the truth has come to them through a messenger who makes things clear. (29)

بَلْ مَتَّعْتُ هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ وَءَابَآءَهُمْ حَتَّىٰ
جَآءَهُمُ ٱلْحَقُّ وَرَسُولٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٢٩﴾

Now that the truth has come to them, they say, 'This is all sorcery, and we reject it outright.' (30)

وَلَمَّا جَآءَهُمُ ٱلْحَقُّ قَالُوا۟ هَٰذَا سِحْرٌ
وَإِنَّا بِهِۦ كَٰفِرُونَ ﴿٣٠﴾

وَقَالُوا۟ لَوْلَا نُزِّلَ هَٰذَا ٱلْقُرْءَانُ عَلَىٰ رَجُلٍ مِّنَ ٱلْقَرْيَتَيْنِ عَظِيمٍ ﴿٣١﴾

They also say, 'Why was not this Qur'ān revealed to some great man of the two cities?' (31)

أَهُمْ يَقْسِمُونَ رَحْمَتَ رَبِّكَ ۚ نَحْنُ قَسَمْنَا بَيْنَهُم مَّعِيشَتَهُمْ فِى ٱلْحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنْيَا ۚ وَرَفَعْنَا بَعْضَهُمْ فَوْقَ بَعْضٍ دَرَجَٰتٍ لِّيَتَّخِذَ بَعْضُهُم بَعْضًا سُخْرِيًّا ۗ وَرَحْمَتُ رَبِّكَ خَيْرٌ مِّمَّا يَجْمَعُونَ ﴿٣٢﴾

Is it they who apportion your Lord's grace? It is We who deal out to them their livelihood in the life of this world, and raise some in rank above others, so that some of them may take others into their service. Your Lord's grace is better than all that they can amass. (32)

وَلَوْلَآ أَن يَكُونَ ٱلنَّاسُ أُمَّةً وَٰحِدَةً لَّجَعَلْنَا لِمَن يَكْفُرُ بِٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ لِبُيُوتِهِمْ سُقُفًا مِّن فِضَّةٍ وَمَعَارِجَ عَلَيْهَا يَظْهَرُونَ ﴿٣٣﴾

Were it not that all people would become one community [of unbelievers], We would have provided those who now disbelieve in the Lord of Grace with roofs of silver for houses, stairways on which to ascend, (33)

وَلِبُيُوتِهِمْ أَبْوَٰبًا وَسُرُرًا عَلَيْهَا يَتَّكِـُٔونَ ﴿٣٤﴾

gates, couches on which to recline, (34)

وَزُخْرُفًا ۚ وَإِن كُلُّ ذَٰلِكَ لَمَّا مَتَٰعُ ٱلْحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنْيَا ۚ وَٱلْءَاخِرَةُ عِندَ رَبِّكَ لِلْمُتَّقِينَ ﴿٣٥﴾

and gold ornaments. Yet all this would have been nothing but the fleeting enjoyment of life in this world. It is the life to come that your Lord reserves for the God-fearing. (35)

We shall assign to whoever chooses to remain blind to the remembrance of the Lord of Grace an evil one as a comrade. (36)

وَمَن يَعْشُ عَن ذِكْرِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ نُقَيِّضْ لَهُۥ شَيْطَٰنًا فَهُوَ لَهُۥ قَرِينٌ ﴿٣٦﴾

These [evil ones] turn them away from the right path, making them think that they are rightly guided. (37)

وَإِنَّهُمْ لَيَصُدُّونَهُمْ عَنِ ٱلسَّبِيلِ وَيَحْسَبُونَ أَنَّهُم مُّهْتَدُونَ ﴿٣٧﴾

When such a person comes to Us, he will say [to his comrade]: 'Would that I was as far away from you as the East is from the West.' Evil indeed are you for a comrade! (38)

حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا جَآءَنَا قَالَ يَٰلَيْتَ بَيْنِى وَبَيْنَكَ بُعْدَ ٱلْمَشْرِقَيْنِ فَبِئْسَ ٱلْقَرِينُ ﴿٣٨﴾

Because of your wrongdoing, it will not be of any benefit to you that you are now to share your suffering. (39)

وَلَن يَنفَعَكُمُ ٱلْيَوْمَ إِذ ظَّلَمْتُمْ أَنَّكُمْ فِى ٱلْعَذَابِ مُشْتَرِكُونَ ﴿٣٩﴾

Can you [Prophet] make the deaf hear? Or guide the blind or those who are in manifest error? (40)

أَفَأَنتَ تُسْمِعُ ٱلصُّمَّ أَوْ تَهْدِى ٱلْعُمْىَ وَمَن كَانَ فِى ضَلَٰلٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٤٠﴾

If We take you away, We shall inflict retribution on them; (41)

فَإِمَّا نَذْهَبَنَّ بِكَ فَإِنَّا مِنْهُم مُّنتَقِمُونَ ﴿٤١﴾

and if We show you the fulfilment of what We have promised them... We have full power over them. (42)

أَوْ نُرِيَنَّكَ ٱلَّذِى وَعَدْنَٰهُمْ فَإِنَّا عَلَيْهِم مُّقْتَدِرُونَ ﴿٤٢﴾

Therefore, hold fast to what has been revealed to you: you certainly are on a straight path; (43)

فَاسْتَمْسِكْ بِالَّذِي أُوحِيَ إِلَيْكَ إِنَّكَ
عَلَىٰ صِرَاطٍ مُّسْتَقِيمٍ ﴿٤٣﴾

and it is an honour for you and your people. In time, you will all be called to account. (44)

وَإِنَّهُۥ لَذِكْرٌ لَّكَ وَلِقَوْمِكَ
وَسَوْفَ تُسْـَٔلُونَ ﴿٤٤﴾

Ask any of the messengers We sent before you: 'Did We ever appoint deities to be worshipped other than the Lord of Grace?' (45)

وَسْـَٔلْ مَنْ أَرْسَلْنَا مِن قَبْلِكَ مِن
رُّسُلِنَآ أَجَعَلْنَا مِن دُونِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ
ءَالِهَةً يُعْبَدُونَ ﴿٤٥﴾

We sent Moses with Our message to Pharaoh and his nobles; and he said: 'I am a messenger of the Lord of all the worlds,' (46)

وَلَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا مُوسَىٰ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَآ إِلَىٰ
فِرْعَوْنَ وَمَلَإِي۟هِۦ فَقَالَ إِنِّى
رَسُولُ رَبِّ ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٤٦﴾

but when he presented Our signs to them, they laughed at them, (47)

فَلَمَّا جَآءَهُم بِـَٔايَٰتِنَآ إِذَا هُم مِّنْهَا
يَضْحَكُونَ ﴿٤٧﴾

yet each sign We showed them was greater than the preceding one. We put them through suffering so that they might return [to the right path]. (48)

وَمَا نُرِيهِم مِّنْ ءَايَةٍ إِلَّا هِىَ أَكْبَرُ
مِنْ أُخْتِهَا وَأَخَذْنَٰهُم بِٱلْعَذَابِ
لَعَلَّهُمْ يَرْجِعُونَ ﴿٤٨﴾

They said: 'Sorcerer, pray to your Lord for us on the strength of the covenant He has made with you. We shall now follow the right way.' (49)

وَقَالُوا۟ يَٰٓأَيُّهَ ٱلسَّاحِرُ ٱدْعُ لَنَا رَبَّكَ بِمَا
عَهِدَ عِندَكَ إِنَّنَا لَمُهْتَدُونَ ﴿٤٩﴾

Yet when We removed their suffering they still broke their word. (50)

فَلَمَّا كَشَفْنَا عَنْهُمُ ٱلْعَذَابَ إِذَا هُمْ يَنكُثُونَ ﴿٥٠﴾

Pharaoh proclaimed to his people, saying: ‘My people, is the kingdom of Egypt not mine, with all these rivers flowing at my feet? Do you not see? (51)

وَنَادَىٰ فِرْعَوْنُ فِى قَوْمِهِۦ قَالَ يَٰقَوْمِ أَلَيْسَ لِى مُلْكُ مِصْرَ وَهَٰذِهِ ٱلْأَنْهَٰرُ تَجْرِى مِن تَحْتِىٓ ۖ أَفَلَا تُبْصِرُونَ ﴿٥١﴾

Am I not better than this contemptible wretch who can hardly make his meaning clear? (52)

أَمْ أَنَا۠ خَيْرٌ مِّنْ هَٰذَا ٱلَّذِى هُوَ مَهِينٌ وَلَا يَكَادُ يُبِينُ ﴿٥٢﴾

Why have no bracelets of gold been given to him? Why have no angels come to accompany him?’ (53)

فَلَوْلَآ أُلْقِىَ عَلَيْهِ أَسْوِرَةٌ مِّن ذَهَبٍ أَوْ جَآءَ مَعَهُ ٱلْمَلَٰٓئِكَةُ مُقْتَرِنِينَ ﴿٥٣﴾

Thus did he make fools of his people, and they obeyed him. They were people lost in evil. (54)

فَٱسْتَخَفَّ قَوْمَهُۥ فَأَطَاعُوهُ ۚ إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا۟ قَوْمًا فَٰسِقِينَ ﴿٥٤﴾

When they incurred Our anger, We inflicted Our retribution on them and drowned them all; (55)

فَلَمَّآ ءَاسَفُونَا ٱنتَقَمْنَا مِنْهُمْ فَأَغْرَقْنَٰهُمْ أَجْمَعِينَ ﴿٥٥﴾

and so We made them a thing of the past and an example for later generations. (56)

فَجَعَلْنَٰهُمْ سَلَفًا وَمَثَلًا لِّلْءَاخِرِينَ ﴿٥٦﴾

Overview

The Quraysh, the major Arabian tribe living in Makkah at the time of the revelation of the Qur'ān, used to say that they were Abraham's descendants, which was true. They also claimed that they followed Abraham's faith, which was untrue. Abraham espoused monotheism, clear and undistorted. It was for his belief in the One God that he abandoned his father and his people, after he was subjected to execution by burning. His religion is based on this basic belief. He urged his children and descendants to remain true to it. Thus, no trace of polytheism is ever found in his faith.

In this section of the *sūrah* the Arabs are made to see this historical fact so that they might check their claims against it. The *sūrah* also reports their objections to the Prophet Muḥammad's message: "*They also say, 'Why was not this Qur'ān revealed to some great man of the two cities?'*" (Verse 31) It shows the basic flaw in this argument: not only does it disregard the true values on which God wants human life to be based but it also espouses false values which turn them away from true guidance. Once the truth is outlined, the *sūrah* tells them of the fate of those who prefer to remain blind to God's remembrance. It also explains why such a choice was made which boils down to nothing less than following what Satan whispers. At the end of this section, the *sūrah* consoles God's messenger, who is grieved by their choice. He is told that he cannot make the blind see nor the deaf hear. They will have their due requital, whether he lives to see how God punishes them or God chooses to delay such punishment. He is directed, therefore, to hold fast to what is revealed to him as it represents the truth preached by all former messengers: "*Ask any of the messengers We sent before you: Did We ever appoint deities to be worshipped other than the Lord of Grace?*" (Verse 45)

In this section we are also given an episode from Moses' story, which reflects the Arabs' attitude to God's messenger. It seems that the same objections are repeated again: Pharaoh and his people adhered to the same false values upheld by the pagan Arabs.

The Principle Abraham Urged

> *Abraham said to his father and his people: 'I renounce what you worship, I worship none other than Him who brought me into being. It is He who will guide me.' He made this an abiding precept among his descendants so that they might always return [to God].* (Verses 26–28)

The precept of monotheism rejected by the Quraysh was nothing but the belief advocated by Abraham, from whom they descended. It was this great principle that Abraham declared to his own father and people, thus rejecting their false creed, disowning their traditional worship. He did not adopt falsehood simply because his father and people practised it. In fact, he did not pay them any courtesy when he declared his rejection of it in a clear and emphatic statement quoted in the Qur'ān: "*I renounce what you worship, I worship none other than Him who brought me into being. It is He who will guide me.*" (Verses 26–27)

It appears from Abraham's statement that although his people did not deny God's existence, they nonetheless assigned partners to Him and worshipped others beside Him. Therefore, Abraham disowned all those they worshipped other than God. He described God by His attribute that makes Him the One to be worshipped, which is the fact that He initiates and originates. It is He who deserves to be worshipped because He is the One who creates. He also stated his firm belief that God would give him guidance. He created him and He knew how to grant him guidance.

Abraham clearly stated this precept of God's oneness to which the whole universe testifies. He said it and made it "*an abiding precept among his descendants so that they might always return [to God].*" (Verse 28) It fell to Abraham to have the largest share in establishing this precept in life, delivering it to future generations through his seed. A number of his descendants were prophets and messengers, among whom three belong to the very select group of messengers endowed with the strongest resolve. These three are Moses, Jesus and Muḥammad (peace be upon them all). Today, scores of centuries after Abraham, more

than a billion people who follow the three Divine religions are indebted to Abraham for their belief in the fundamental principle of God's oneness. It was he who made it an abiding precept among his descendants. Many of them may abandon it, but it remains firm, clear and undistorted. Thus, people will always have a chance to return to God, their Creator, and worship Him. This represents a return to the truth, understanding it and holding firm to it.

Mankind knew the principle of God's oneness before Abraham, through many prophets such as Noah, Hūd, Ṣāliḥ and perhaps Idrīs, as also through other messengers who did not have a continuous line of descendants who could revive and advocate the principle. It was, therefore, with Abraham that this principle took firm root on earth. It continued to be advocated by his descendants, with a continuous line of prophethood, up to the last messenger, Muḥammad (peace be upon him), who descended from Abraham through his son, Ishmael, and who bore the greatest similarity to him.[2] Muḥammad stated the principle of God's oneness in its final and most comprehensive form, a form that influences every human activity and life concept.

How did those Arabs, descending from Abraham, receive this principle? They had after all been far removed from it for generations. Indeed, they had forgotten Abraham's faith to the extent that the principle of God's oneness was alien to them, viewed as exceedingly singular. They gave the Prophet preaching it a very bad reception, judging the Divine message by earthly standards. Hence, their criteria were flawed:

> *I have allowed these people and their forefathers to enjoy their lives freely until the truth has come to them through a messenger who makes things clear. Now that the truth has come to them, they say, 'This is all sorcery, and we reject it outright.' They also say, 'Why was not this Qur'ān revealed to some great man of the two cities.' Is it they who apportion your Lord's grace? It is We who deal out to*

2. Jābir quotes the Prophet as saying: "I have been shown earlier prophets. I found Moses (peace be upon him) to be a tall, slim type of man, as though he belonged to the men of Shanū'ah [One of the tribes of Yemen]. I saw Jesus (peace be upon him) and the person I know who has the closest similarity to him is 'Urwah ibn Mas'ūd. I saw Abraham (peace be upon him) and the one who bears closest similarity to him is your man, [meaning himself]."– al-Bukhārī

> *them their livelihood in the life of this world, and raise some in rank above others, so that some of them may take others into their service. Your Lord's grace is better than all that they can amass. Were it not that all people would become one community [of unbelievers], We would have provided those who now disbelieve in the Lord of Grace with roofs of silver for houses, stairways on which to ascend, gates, couches on which to recline, and gold ornaments. Yet all this would have been nothing but the fleeting enjoyment of life in this world. It is the life to come that your Lord reserves for the God-fearing.* (Verses 29–35)

The *sūrah* turns to speak of those people present at the time of revelation: "*I have allowed these people and their forefathers to enjoy their lives freely until the truth has come to them through a messenger who makes things clear.*" (Verse 29) It is as though the *sūrah* is saying: 'Let us not talk about Abraham, for these people have no relation to him. We will discuss their situation specifically, which has no relevance to Abraham and what he advocated. God says that He allowed these people and their ancestors to enjoy life, providing them with much, and allowing them a long life, until the truth came to them in the shape of the Qur'ān, and there came to them a messenger who stated things clearly. Nevertheless, "*Now that the truth has come to them, they say, 'This is all sorcery, and we reject it outright.'*"' (Verse 30)

The truth, which is always clearly manifest, cannot be confused with sorcery. What they said was conjecture and they were the first to know that it was false. The elders of the Quraysh could not have been blind to the truth of the message of the Qur'ān, yet they aimed to deceive the masses: first by alleging that it was sorcery and secondly by reaffirming their rejection of it: "*This is all sorcery, and we reject it outright.*" (Verse 30) In this way, they sought to impress the masses by showing themselves to be confident of what they said. Like all who are deluded, the masses would then follow them. What the Quraysh elders feared most was that they might lose their influence over people. Should the people see the truth of the principle of God's oneness, no leader would have any influence except within the framework of worshipping God alone.

Whom to Entrust with God's Message

The Qur'ān describes their confused values and standards as they objected to the choice of Muḥammad (peace be upon him) as the one to bring them light and the message of the truth: "*They also say: Why was not this Qur'ān revealed to some great man of the two cities?*" (Verse 31) The two cities they referred to were Makkah and Ṭā'if. The Prophet belonged to the most distinguished family in the clan of Hāshim of the Quraysh tribe, which were the elite among Arabs. He was also known to be a man of high principles and fine manners, even before he was chosen as God's messenger. However, he was not a tribal chief, while his environment placed much store on such considerations. Hence their objection: "*Why was not this Qur'ān revealed to some great man of the two cities?*" (Verse 31)

God certainly knows best whom to entrust with His message. He chose the man whom He knew to be best suited to the task. Limitless is God in His glory! He chose a man whose paramount qualities were his morality and dedication, both of which are part of the nature and essence of the Islamic message. For the delivery of His message, He chose neither a tribal chief nor a man of wealth or social influence. This because He did not wish any earthly value to cast a shadow over the message bestowed from on high. It should neither be adorned with an earthly jewel nor be influenced by any alien effect. Thus, no one would embrace it to achieve ambition, and no one would seek it for unfair gain.

With their narrow view of worldly pleasures and lack of awareness of the nature of the Divine message, the Arabs objected to the choice of Muḥammad (peace be upon him) as God's messenger, suggesting that a recognized leader of either of the two cities would have been preferable. The *sūrah* denounces their objections and reminds them of how God bestows His grace on whomever He chooses of His servants. It shows the flaw inherent in their concepts which confuse worldly values with Divine ones. It also makes clear to them how their values score in God's accurate measure: "*Is it they who apportion your Lord's grace? It is We who deal out to them their livelihood in the life of this world, and raise some in rank above others, so that some of them may*

take others into their service. Your Lord's grace is better than all that they can amass." (Verse 32)

How singular! What business do they have in apportioning God's grace when they cannot even determine their own provisions? Whatever comes their way of earthly provisions is determined by God, according to His wisdom and how He wants life on earth to progress: "*It is We who deal out to them their livelihood in the life of this world, and raise some in rank above others, so that some of them may take others into their service.*" (Verse 32)

People's livelihood and provisions in this present life are influenced by their individual talents, life circumstances and social relations. The way they are shared out among individuals and communities is subject to all these factors. Its sharing, however, differs from one generation and society to another, according to the systems, relations and general circumstances of each. The one essential feature which has never been absent, even under the most government-controlled system, is that people's shares are different. It has never happened that people receive equal shares, not even under artificial social orders claiming to enshrine absolute equality.

The result is that some people are raised in rank above others; a situation that occurs in all societies and generations. The purpose for such difference is that "*some of them may take others into their service.*" (Verse 32) When the wheel of life turns, some people will inevitably be made to serve others. What is meant here is not that one class or one person should behave arrogantly towards another. This is a naïve understanding that is unsuited to the Divine pronouncement. The significance of the statement is longer lasting than any change or development in human society. All mankind serve one another as the wheel of life turns with them all. The one whose provisions are stinted serves the one who is affluent, but the reverse is true as well. Those who have plenty accumulate wealth, using it for their living and employ others who will then receive their provisions by virtue of their work. Each one thus serves another, and it is the difference in their livelihoods and their provisions that enable them to use one another in the course of life. Thus, a worker is in the service of the engineer and the employer,

while the engineer is in the service of the employer and the worker, and the employer, in turn, serves both engineer and worker in like manner. All contribute to man's assignment on earth through their differences in abilities, talents, livelihoods and incomes.

I know that many advocates of government-controlled systems cite this verse in their criticism of Islam and its social and economic systems. I also think that some Muslims feel uneasy about this statement. They feel that they need to defend Islam against the charge of establishing distinction between people in their provisions so that some of them can take others into service. It is time, however, that the advocates of Islam should stand firm, feeling absolutely proud of their faith. They need not defend it against a trivial accusation that will always remain unsubstantiated. Islam states permanent facts that remain part of the nature of the universe for as long as life continues.

It is part of the nature of human life that it relies on differences between individual human beings with respect to their abilities and talents, as well as to the type of work each one can do and the degree of excellence a man or a woman can achieve. These differences are necessary to ensure the fulfilment of a wide range of roles needed to discharge man's mission on earth. Had all human beings been copies of the same model, life on earth could not have survived. Numerous types of work would not have had corresponding abilities. They would have remained undone because there would not have been people who could do them. The One who created life and willed that it should steadily progress also created people with different talents and abilities to correspond to the different tasks that needed fulfilling. It is through such differences in roles that differences of livelihood and provisions occur. Such is the rule.

Greater than Life's Riches

So much for people's livelihood in this present life. Beyond it, however, is something far greater: "*Your Lord's grace is better than all that they can amass.*" (Verse 32) God bestows His grace on those whom He selects, knowing that they deserve it. There is, however, no

connection whatsoever between God's grace and what people have in this present life. Nor is there any connection between it and the values of this world. Such lots are worthless according to God's measure. Hence, they are given to good and bad people, while God's grace is preserved for those whom He chooses.

Earthly values are so petty and insignificant that had God so willed, He would have given them in plenty to those who disbelieve in Him. The only reason behind not doing so is that such plenty would then become a source of delusion, preventing many people from accepting the Divine faith:

> *Were it not that all people would become one community [of unbelievers], We would have provided those who now disbelieve in the Lord of Grace with roofs of silver for houses, stairways on which to ascend, gates, couches on which to recline, and gold ornaments. Yet all this would have been nothing but the fleeting enjoyment of life in this world. It is the life to come that your Lord reserves for the God-fearing.* (Verses 33–35)

It is God who knows man's weaknesses best and what effect wealth and affluence have on him. Had it not been for the fact that people would be lured by such luxuries, God would have given to those who disbelieve in the Lord of Grace abundance in this world. He would have given them homes with roofs of silver and staircases made of gold. He would also have given them houses with many doors, indeed palaces with many couches to recline upon and gold ornaments as decor. Giving such luxuries in plenty to disbelievers clearly shows how worthless these items are on God's scales. "*Yet all this would have been nothing but the fleeting enjoyment of life in this world.*" (Verse 35) It is all no more than a fleeting enjoyment that lasts no more than this present life. Moreover, it is all no more than a trifling suited to this lower life.

"*It is the life to come that your Lord reserves for the God-fearing.*" (Verse 35) These are the ones who are honoured by God because they are God-fearing. He stores for them what is better, greater in value and more lasting. He grants them what is special. They are

thus distinguished over those who deny God, the Lord of Grace, for these are only given the trifling enjoyments of this worldly life, which animals also share.

Worldly luxuries, examples of which are given in these verses, dazzle large numbers of people, particularly when they see unbelievers enjoying such commodities while believers are deprived of them. They may see good believers suffering hardship while unbelievers enjoy power, wealth and high position. God knows the effects of such situations on the majority of people. Therefore, He explains to them how worthless these luxuries are in His unerring scales and how truly worthy what He has in store for believers is. A believing heart is reassured that God chooses only what is right and suitable for each group. The Makkan unbelievers who objected to God's choice of a man who had not been given much wealth rated people according to what they have of money and position. These verses make clear how trifling these are in God's sight, so much so that He gives them to the worst of His creatures, the people whom He dislikes most. Hence, affluence and its like does not indicate a person's position with God.

Thus the Qur'ān puts matters in their right perspective, showing the basis on which provisions are given in both this life and the life to come and stating those values that are true and consistent. In doing so, it lays down the basic principles that are unaffected by life's circumstances, developments, different creeds, social systems or environments. Life has its consistent, unchanging rules that govern its development. People who look only at changing appearances and do not reflect on the permanent rules tend to overlook this God-made law. They think that change applies to the essence of things as well as their form and appearance. Hence, they allege that the ever continuing march of life precludes the existence of permanent rules and values. The only law that they believe to be unchanging is that whereby everything undergoes continuous change. We, who believe in Islam, see in what is around us the truth of what God has stated: consistency and change are present, side by side, in every corner and aspect of the universe. The most obvious example before us is the difference in livelihood and provisions between people, and their varied causes and rates.

Which Type of Comrade

The *sūrah* moves on to explain the fate of those who are given plenty of the luxuries of this world but who remain unmindful of their duty of obedience to God and glorifying Him so as to deserve the great prize He grants on the Day of Judgement to those who fear Him:

> *We shall assign to whoever chooses to remain blind to the remembrance of the Lord of Grace an evil one as a comrade. These [evil ones] turn them away from the right path, making them think that they are rightly guided. When such a person comes to Us, he will say [to his comrade]: 'Would that I was as far away from you as the East is from the West.' Evil indeed are you for a comrade! Because of your wrongdoing, it will not be of any benefit to you that you are now to share your suffering.* (Verses 36–39)

The Arabic text uses the term *'ashā* as the choice of unbelievers. This term signifies a tiredness of the eyes that prevents them from seeing things. It mostly occurs when facing a glaring light which the human eye cannot look into, or in the evening as darkness begins to descend when a weak eye cannot see things clearly. It may also be the result of illness. Its usage here, signifies blindness and a wilful turning away from God, the Lord of Grace.

"*We shall assign to whoever chooses to remain blind to the remembrance of the Lord of Grace an evil one as a comrade.*" (Verse 36) It has been God's will that when man chooses to neglect His remembrance, Satan finds his way to him and becomes his comrade, whispering to him and making evil things seem goodly and attractive. In the Arabic text, this verse is stated in the conditional form to express a consistent rule that makes the result inevitable when the cause occurs. Thus the evil comrade will certainly turn his comrade away from the right path, even though such a person may continue to think that he is on the right track: "*These [evil ones] turn them away from the right path, making them think that they are rightly guided.*" (Verse 37) This is the worst thing that one comrade can do for another: turning him away from the right path and not allowing him to wake up or reflect on what he is doing. Instead, he keeps him deluded, thinking that he is

doing well, until he comes face to face with his inevitable end. Note, too, that the verse uses the present tense, implying that this is going on now before the eyes of onlookers, though those who are blind do not see it.

The end comes all of a sudden while they are still deluded: "*When such a person comes to Us, he will say [to his comrade]: 'Would that I was as far away from you as the East is from the West.*" (Verse 38) In an instant we move from this present world to the next. Those who chose to be blind unexpectedly arrive at their destination and wake up like a drunken person regains his consciousness. They open their weak eyes and each one of them looks at his evil comrade who led him to ruin while assuring him of safety. He is so enraged with him that he says to him: "*Would that I was as far away from you as the East is from the West. Evil indeed are you for a comrade!*" (Verse 38) I wish I had never met you and that a great gulf had existed between us. The *sūrah* then makes this comment on the exchange between the two comrades: "*Evil indeed are you for a comrade!*" (Verse 38)

As the curtain drops on them both, we hear a word that crushes all hope for them: "*Because of your wrongdoing, it will not be of any benefit to you that you are now to share your suffering.*" (Verse 39) The suffering of each is given in full measure. It is not something to share out among them so as to reduce its effect.

Making the Deaf Hear

The *sūrah* now addresses the Prophet with a word of consolation so that he does not grieve about those who turned away from him, disbelieving in his message. It encourages him to hold on to the truth revealed to him from on high, as it is the same word of truth given to every messenger of God:

> *Can you [Prophet] make the deaf hear? Or guide the blind or those who are in manifest error? If We take you away, We shall inflict retribution on them; and if We show you the fulfilment of what We have promised them... We have full power over them. Therefore, hold fast to what has been revealed to you: you certainly are on a*

> *straight path; and it is an honour for you and your people. In time, you will all be called to account. Ask any of the messengers We sent before you: 'Did We ever appoint deities to be worshipped other than the Lord of Grace?'* (Verses 40–45)

This point is repeated several times in the Qur'ān to comfort the Prophet and to explain the nature of guidance and error, attributing them both to God's will. They are part of the task assigned to God's messengers, (peace be upon them all). Here the *sūrah* puts clear lines between man's limited power, even at its strongest level given to prophets, and God's free and unrestricted power. It emphasizes God's oneness in one of the most inspiring images in the Qur'ān.

"*Can you [Prophet] make the deaf hear? Or guide the blind or those who are in manifest error?*" (Verse 40) They are neither deaf nor blind, but akin to both in so far as they have chosen to turn away from Divine guidance and follow error. The task assigned to the Prophet is to put the facts before the ones who hear and to guide those who see. When people shut down their receptive faculties and refuse to listen to the discourse addressing their hearts and souls, the Prophet can do nothing for them. There is no way, then, that he can guide them to the truth. He should not grieve over their error, after having fulfilled his task to the best of his ability.

When the Prophet has done his duty, God will now determine matters: "*If We take you away, We shall inflict retribution on them; and if We show you the fulfilment of what We have promised them... We have full power over them.*" (Verses 41–42) The case is resolved either way. Should the Prophet die first, God will determine the punishment of those who rejected his message. If, on the other hand, he remains alive until the fulfilment of what they were warned against, God is certainly able to mete out what His warnings contain. They cannot escape. What He determines will take place. In either case, the matter is subject to His will. The message is His, while the Prophet is only His messenger.

"*Therefore, hold fast to what has been revealed to you: you certainly are on a straight path.*" (Verse 43) Hold on to what you have been given and go along your way, reassured, caring little for them and what

they do. For, "*you certainly are on a straight path.*" It will neither bend nor deviate. This faith is closely related to the essential truth of the universe. It is consistent with the basic law that governs the universe. It leads its follower to the Lord Creator, safe from all error and deviation. God reassures His messenger, re-emphasizing this truth. The advocates of Islam in subsequent generations should find in it reassurance and comfort, even though they may suffer a great deal at the hands of those who have gone astray.

"*And it is an honour for you and your people. In time, you will all be called to account.*" (Verse 44) This verse may be understood in two ways: this Qur'ān is a reminder to you and your people, and you will be questioned about it on the Day of Judgement. Now that you have been given this reminder, you are left with no argument if you fail to follow it. Alternatively, it means that the Qur'ān is an honour that raises the standing of the Prophet and his people. This is what has taken place in reality. As for the Prophet, hundreds of millions of people pray to God at all times of the day and night to bless him and grant him peace; this for more than fourteen centuries. Hundreds of millions of hearts will continue to love him and bless him until the end of time. As for his people, they were very much on the margin of life until the Qur'ān was revealed, giving them the leading role in human history. When they carried its message to the world, they had its leadership, but only for as long as they held on to the Qur'ān. When they abandoned it, they were reduced to the lowest level among humanity. They were left at the tail end after once having been distinguished leaders. Those people whom God has chosen to carry His message and to assume mankind's leadership will face a great responsibility should they abandon their trust: "*you will all be called to account.*" (Verse 44) Of the two interpretations, I prefer this second meaning as it is broader in scope.

"*Ask any of the messengers We sent before you: 'Did We ever appoint deities to be worshipped other than the Lord of Grace?'*" (Verse 45) God's oneness is the central point of Divine religion ever since the first of His messengers. On what basis, then, do those who worship other beings rely? The Qur'ān states this truth here in a unique image that shows the Prophet asking the messengers before him whether God has

appointed deities to be worshipped other than Himself. The very question implies its definitive and categorical answer, given by each and every one of God's messengers. It is a very pleasing image, one that employs a strong, inspiring and effective style.

Needless to say, there are gulfs of time and place between the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) and the messengers who went before him. There is also the gulf between life and death, which is far greater than the gulfs of time and place. Yet all these gulfs totally disappear before the essential truth of the unity of the Divine message based on God's oneness. It is this truth that remains solidly present while considerations of time, place, life and death, as also of all changing phenomena, disappear. The dead and the living all testify to it at all times. Such are the connotations of this remarkable Qur'ānic statement.

However, in relation to the Prophet and his brothers, the messengers of God sent before him, and their bond with their Lord, nothing is considered far or near. At any Divine moment, all barriers are removed, and the essential, fundamental truth appears in full colour. It is the truth of all existence that transcends all barriers of time, place, shape and image. At this moment, the Prophet asks and receives the answer, as happened to him on his night journey when he led all earlier prophets in prayer.

When we look at such a statement, it is better for us not to think of limitations in our life. What is familiar to us in life is by no means the total law governing the entire universe. We should remember that we only know some of the phenomena operating in the universe and see some of their effects when we recognize an aspect of its laws. There are barriers in our constitutional make-up and in our senses that limit our perception to what is familiar to us. Beyond that, there is a realm that we cannot fathom.

The Same Old Argument

The *sūrah* continues to console the Prophet in the face of the objections raised about God's choice of him as the messenger by the chiefs of his people, people who upheld the false values of the present world. In this context, the *sūrah* relates an episode from Moses' history

depicting how Pharaoh and his people also upheld the same values. The Quraysh elders said: "*Why was not this Qur'ān revealed to some great man of the two cities?*" (Verse 31) In former times, Pharaoh took pride in his power and kingdom, arrogantly asking: "*Is the kingdom of Egypt not mine, with all these rivers flowing at my feet? Do you not see?*" (Verse 51) Proud and arrogant, he pointed to Moses, God's prophet and messenger, who had no great worldly wealth or position, and said: "*Am I not better than this contemptible wretch who can hardly make his meaning clear?*" (Verse 52) Pharaoh also made a suggestion similar to the unbelieving Quraysh: "*Why have no bracelets of gold been given to him? Why have no angels come to accompany him?*" (Verse 53) It sounds like a musical recording, played over and over again.

The *sūrah* shows how the deluded masses responded, despite the miracles shown by Moses and the tests to which they were subjected. Every time a hardship befell them, they would cry out to Moses to pray to his Lord to lift their affliction. The *sūrah* also explains the fate they suffered after they failed to heed the warning: "*When they incurred Our anger, We inflicted Our retribution on them and drowned them all; and so We made them a thing of the past and an example for later generations.*" (Verses 55–56) Yet these later unbelievers still do not take heed.

Throughout this episode, the unity of the Divine message is clearly apparent. Similarly, the nature of the tyrannical elders and their reception of the message of the truth is the same. They all cling to the trivial values of this world. We also see the nature of the masses who are easily led astray by their leaders.

> *We sent Moses with Our message to Pharaoh and his nobles; and he said: 'I am a messenger of the Lord of all the worlds,' but when he presented Our signs to them, they laughed at them.* (Verses 46–47)

The episode starts with a very brief reference to the first meeting between Moses and Pharaoh, as a prelude to the main point intended here, which is to portray the similarity of the objections made by Pharaoh and the pagan Arabs, as also their similar values. It sums up the nature of Moses' message in these words: "*I am a messenger of the Lord of all the worlds.*" (Verse 46) It is the same truth stated by every

messenger: that he is 'a messenger' sent by 'the Lord of all the worlds'. The *sūrah* then provides a very quick reference to the signs given to Moses, adding how the people received these: "*When he presented Our signs to them, they laughed at them.*" (Verse 47) The arrogant and the ignorant always behave this way.

This is followed by a reference to the testing hardships God inflicted on Pharaoh and his people, which are detailed in other *sūrahs*:

> *Yet each sign We showed them was greater than the preceding one. We put them through suffering so that they might return [to the right path]. They said: 'Sorcerer, pray to your Lord for us on the strength of the covenant He has made with you. We shall now follow the right way.' Yet when We removed their suffering they still broke their word.* (Verses 48–50)

The signs shown by Moses did not provide enough motivation for people to believe, yet each was greater than the one before it. This confirms what God says in several places that such signs do not provide guidance to a heart if it is not ready to listen, and that God's messengers cannot make the deaf hear or the blind see. What is most singular in what God describes of Pharaoh's and his people's attitude is that when they spoke to Moses, they said: "*Sorcerer, pray to your Lord for us on the strength of the covenant He has made with you. We shall now follow the right way.*" (Verse 49) They appeal to him to do his best to lift their hardship, yet they address him as '*sorcerer*'. They also say, '*Pray to your Lord*' while he tells them that he is '*a messenger from the Lord of all the worlds,*' not his own special Lord to whom only he and a few followers submit. Neither miracles nor God's messenger's words touched their hearts, despite their promise: "*We shall now follow the right way.*" Such promises are often forgotten: "*Yet when We removed their suffering they still broke their word.*" (Verse 50)

The masses may be influenced by miracles, and the truth may find its way to their hearts that have long been deceived. To forestall this, Pharaoh appeared before them in his full regalia, adorned in splendour. He tried to deceive them with a superficial argument, one that unfortunately appeals to those who have long endured tyranny:

Pharaoh proclaimed to his people, saying: 'My people, is the kingdom of Egypt not mine, with all these rivers flowing at my feet? Do you not see? Am I not better than this contemptible wretch who can hardly make his meaning clear? Why have no bracelets of gold been given to him? Why have no angels come to accompany him?' (Verses 51–53)

The kingdom of Egypt and the rivers flowing at Pharaoh's feet are there, before their very eyes. The masses are deluded by such apparent power and splendour. By contrast, the kingdom of the heavens and earth, and all that is between them, compared to which Egypt is no more than a little particle, requires believing hearts to perceive. Only such believers can draw the right comparison. Under the yoke of tyranny that has long subjugated them, the masses are dazzled by the glitter they see before them. They do not stretch their minds to reflect on the kingdom of the universe and to whom it belongs.

Pharaoh knew how to manipulate his people's hearts and delude them with his riches: "*Am I not better than this contemptible wretch who can hardly make his meaning clear?*" (Verse 52) What he meant by referring to '*this contemptible wretch*' was that Moses was not a king, a prince, or a man of power or wealth. Or perhaps he meant that Moses belonged to the Israelites, a wretched and enslaved community in Egypt. His other description of Moses as one '*who can hardly make his meaning clear*' refers to his speech impediment. By the time of this encounter with Pharaoh, however, Moses was cured of this by God in answer to his prayer: "*My Lord, open up my heart [to Your light], and make my mission easy for me, and free my tongue from its impediment, so that people may understand what I say.*" (20: 25–28) Nothing now prevented him from making his meaning clear. In the eyes of the masses, Pharaoh, with his terrestrial kingdom, was better than Moses, even though he had the word of truth, was a prophet, and advocated the faith that ensured safety from hell.

"*Why have no bracelets of gold been given to him?*" (Verse 53) Is such a petty thing as a gold bracelet needed to confirm a Divine message? Is a mere trifling to be valued as greater than the miracles God gave to His messenger? Or, perhaps, Pharaoh meant that Moses should have

been crowned as king to give him power as well as the message. "*Why have no angels come to accompany him?*" (Verse 53) This is yet another deceptive objection, one that is often levelled at God's messengers.

"*Thus did he make fools of his people, and they obeyed him. They were people lost in evil.*" (Verse 54) That tyrants make fools of their people is a familiar story. First of all, they isolate their people from all sources of knowledge, withholding the facts until they are forgotten and no longer sought after. They use all types of influences until their minds are fully convinced of them. Thereafter, it is easy to make fools of them and lead them wherever they want them to go. Yet no tyrant can do this to his people unless they are transgressors, turning away from God's straight path after having abandoned the standards of His faith. Conversely, it is extremely difficult to try to delude believers or make fools of them. Hence, the Qur'ān gives the reason for the response Pharaoh received from his people: "*Thus did he make fools of his people, and they obeyed him. They were people lost in evil.*" (Verse 54)

The time of tests, warnings and education was over. God was fully aware that these people would not believe. The masses willingly obeyed Pharaoh, an arrogant tyrant, turning a blind eye to God's light and His clear signs. Therefore, the warning had to be fulfilled and God's word was issued: "*When they incurred Our anger, We inflicted Our retribution on them and drowned them all; and so We made them a thing of the past and an example for later generations.*" (Verses 55–56)

Here, God is speaking about Himself in the context of retribution inflicted on people whom He destroyed. This is meant to highlight His limitless power. What the *sūrah* describes is a situation where these people were guilty of a great crime incurring God's anger. Therefore, "*We inflicted Our retribution on them and drowned them all*", meaning Pharaoh, the notables among his people and his army. In this way did they meet their end when they tried to pursue Moses and his people. God made of them the ancestors of every erring generation. He also set them as "*an example for later generations*". (Verse 56) Hence, later communities should learn their story and benefit from the lessons it delivers.

Thus, this episode of Moses' story reflects similar attitudes to those of the pagan Arabs as they confronted God's last messenger. It is mentioned here so as to comfort and support the Prophet and those who believed with him. It warns the unbelievers against a fate similar to that of earlier people. This is one example of how the Qur'ān uses a historical account as an edifying narrative. The *sūrah* then gives us an episode from Jesus' story against the backdrop of the Arabs' argument in defence of their worship of angels and the comparison they cite, as some Christians worship Jesus. This is given in the last passage of the *sūrah*.

3

When Friends Turn Enemies

Whenever the son of Mary is cited as an example, your people raise an outcry, (57)

وَلَمَّا ضُرِبَ ٱبْنُ مَرْيَمَ مَثَلًا إِذَا قَوْمُكَ مِنْهُ يَصِدُّونَ ﴿٥٧﴾

saying: 'Who is better: our deities or he?' They cite him only to challenge you. They are contentious people. (58)

وَقَالُوٓا۟ ءَأَٰلِهَتُنَا خَيْرٌ أَمْ هُوَ ۚ مَا ضَرَبُوهُ لَكَ إِلَّا جَدَلًۢا ۚ بَلْ هُمْ قَوْمٌ خَصِمُونَ ﴿٥٨﴾

He was but a servant of Ours whom We had favoured and made an example to the Children of Israel. (59)

إِنْ هُوَ إِلَّا عَبْدٌ أَنْعَمْنَا عَلَيْهِ وَجَعَلْنَٰهُ مَثَلًا لِّبَنِىٓ إِسْرَٰٓءِيلَ ﴿٥٩﴾

Had it been Our will, We could have made you angels, succeeding one another on earth. (60)

وَلَوْ نَشَآءُ لَجَعَلْنَا مِنكُم مَّلَٰٓئِكَةً فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ يَخْلُفُونَ ﴿٦٠﴾

He is a portent of the Last Hour. Have no doubt about it, but follow Me: this is a straight path. (61)

وَإِنَّهُۥ لَعِلْمٌ لِّلسَّاعَةِ فَلَا تَمْتَرُنَّ بِهَا وَٱتَّبِعُونِ ۚ هَٰذَا صِرَٰطٌ مُّسْتَقِيمٌ ﴿٦١﴾

Let not Satan debar you; for he is your sworn enemy. (62)

وَلَا يَصُدَّنَّكُمُ ٱلشَّيْطَٰنُ ۖ إِنَّهُۥ لَكُمْ عَدُوٌّ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٦٢﴾

When Jesus came with clear signs, he said: 'I have come to you with wisdom, and to make clear to you some of that on which you differ. Therefore, fear God and follow me. (63)

وَلَمَّا جَآءَ عِيسَىٰ بِٱلْبَيِّنَٰتِ قَالَ قَدْ جِئْتُكُم بِٱلْحِكْمَةِ وَلِأُبَيِّنَ لَكُم بَعْضَ ٱلَّذِى تَخْتَلِفُونَ فِيهِ ۖ فَٱتَّقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُونِ ﴿٦٣﴾

God is my Lord and your Lord: so worship Him alone. This is a straight path.' (64)

إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ هُوَ رَبِّى وَرَبُّكُمْ فَٱعْبُدُوهُ ۚ هَٰذَا صِرَٰطٌ مُّسْتَقِيمٌ ﴿٦٤﴾

Yet are the sects at variance among themselves. Woe, then, to the wrongdoers for the painful suffering that will befall them on a grievous day. (65)

فَٱخْتَلَفَ ٱلْأَحْزَابُ مِنۢ بَيْنِهِمْ ۖ فَوَيْلٌ لِّلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا۟ مِنْ عَذَابِ يَوْمٍ أَلِيمٍ ﴿٦٥﴾

What are they waiting for other than the Last Hour, which will come upon them all of a sudden and take them unawares? (66)

هَلْ يَنظُرُونَ إِلَّا ٱلسَّاعَةَ أَن تَأْتِيَهُم بَغْتَةً وَهُمْ لَا يَشْعُرُونَ ﴿٦٦﴾

On that Day, friends will become enemies to one another, except for the God-fearing. (67)

ٱلْأَخِلَّآءُ يَوْمَئِذٍۭ بَعْضُهُمْ لِبَعْضٍ عَدُوٌّ إِلَّا ٱلْمُتَّقِينَ ﴿٦٧﴾

You, servants of Mine, no fear need you have today, nor shall you grieve. (68)

يَٰعِبَادِ لَا خَوْفٌ عَلَيْكُمُ ٱلْيَوْمَ وَلَآ أَنتُمْ تَحْزَنُونَ ﴿٦٨﴾

You, who have believed in Our revelations and surrendered yourselves to Us, (69)

ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَا وَكَانُوا۟ مُسْلِمِينَ ﴿٦٩﴾

ٱدْخُلُوا۟ ٱلْجَنَّةَ أَنتُمْ وَأَزْوَٰجُكُمْ تُحْبَرُونَ ﴿٧٠﴾

enter paradise, you and your spouses, in pure happiness. (70)

يُطَافُ عَلَيْهِم بِصِحَافٍ مِّن ذَهَبٍ وَأَكْوَابٍ ۖ وَفِيهَا مَا تَشْتَهِيهِ ٱلْأَنفُسُ وَتَلَذُّ ٱلْأَعْيُنُ ۖ وَأَنتُمْ فِيهَا خَٰلِدُونَ ﴿٧١﴾

They will be waited upon with trays and goblets of gold; and there will be found all that the souls may desire and the eyes may delight in. There you shall abide. (71)

وَتِلْكَ ٱلْجَنَّةُ ٱلَّتِىٓ أُورِثْتُمُوهَا بِمَا كُنتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٧٢﴾

This is the garden that shall be your own on account of what you used to do. (72)

لَكُمْ فِيهَا فَٰكِهَةٌ كَثِيرَةٌ مِّنْهَا تَأْكُلُونَ ﴿٧٣﴾

You shall have there fruits in abundance, from which to eat. (73)

إِنَّ ٱلْمُجْرِمِينَ فِى عَذَابِ جَهَنَّمَ خَٰلِدُونَ ﴿٧٤﴾

The evildoers shall abide in the suffering of hell. (74)

لَا يُفَتَّرُ عَنْهُمْ وَهُمْ فِيهِ مُبْلِسُونَ ﴿٧٥﴾

It will not be lightened for them; they will remain in utter despair. (75)

وَمَا ظَلَمْنَٰهُمْ وَلَٰكِن كَانُوا۟ هُمُ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ﴿٧٦﴾

We never wronged them; it was they who have wronged themselves. (76)

وَنَادَوْا۟ يَٰمَٰلِكُ لِيَقْضِ عَلَيْنَا رَبُّكَ ۖ قَالَ إِنَّكُم مَّٰكِثُونَ ﴿٧٧﴾

They will cry, ‘Mālik, if only your Lord would put an end to us!’ He will answer: ‘You are here to stay.’ (77)

لَقَدْ جِئْنَاكُم بِالْحَقِّ وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكْثَرَكُمْ لِلْحَقِّ كَارِهُونَ ﴿٧٨﴾

We have brought the truth to you, but most of you abhor the truth. (78)

أَمْ أَبْرَمُوا أَمْرًا فَإِنَّا مُبْرِمُونَ ﴿٧٩﴾

If they have resolved on some scheme, We have a scheme of Our own. (79)

أَمْ يَحْسَبُونَ أَنَّا لَا نَسْمَعُ سِرَّهُمْ وَنَجْوَاهُم ۚ بَلَىٰ وَرُسُلُنَا لَدَيْهِمْ يَكْتُبُونَ ﴿٨٠﴾

Or do they think that We do not hear their secret talk and their private counsel? Indeed We do, and Our messengers are with them, recording all. (80)

قُلْ إِن كَانَ لِلرَّحْمَٰنِ وَلَدٌ فَأَنَا أَوَّلُ الْعَابِدِينَ ﴿٨١﴾

Say: 'If the Lord of Grace had a son, I would be the first to worship him.' (81)

سُبْحَانَ رَبِّ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ رَبِّ الْعَرْشِ عَمَّا يَصِفُونَ ﴿٨٢﴾

Limitless in His glory is the Lord of the heavens and earth, the Lord of the Throne: He is far above their false descriptions. (82)

فَذَرْهُمْ يَخُوضُوا وَيَلْعَبُوا حَتَّىٰ يُلَاقُوا يَوْمَهُمُ الَّذِي يُوعَدُونَ ﴿٨٣﴾

Leave them to indulge in idle talk and play until they face the Day they have been promised. (83)

وَهُوَ الَّذِي فِي السَّمَاءِ إِلَٰهٌ وَفِي الْأَرْضِ إِلَٰهٌ ۚ وَهُوَ الْحَكِيمُ الْعَلِيمُ ﴿٨٤﴾

It is He alone who is God in heaven and God on earth; He alone is the Wise, the All-Knowing. (84)

وَتَبَارَكَ ٱلَّذِى لَهُۥ مُلْكُ ٱلسَّمَـٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا وَعِندَهُۥ عِلْمُ ٱلسَّاعَةِ وَإِلَيْهِ تُرْجَعُونَ ﴿٨٥﴾

Blessed is He to whom sovereignty over the heavens and the earth and all that is between them belongs, and with whom the knowledge of the Last Hour rests, and to whom you shall be brought back. (85)

وَلَا يَمْلِكُ ٱلَّذِينَ يَدْعُونَ مِن دُونِهِ ٱلشَّفَـٰعَةَ إِلَّا مَن شَهِدَ بِٱلْحَقِّ وَهُمْ يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٨٦﴾

Those whom they invoke beside Him have no power of intercession, unlike those who know the truth and bear witness to it. (86)

وَلَئِن سَأَلْتَهُم مَّنْ خَلَقَهُمْ لَيَقُولُنَّ ٱللَّهُ ۖ فَأَنَّىٰ يُؤْفَكُونَ ﴿٨٧﴾

Yet if you ask them who created them they are sure to answer, 'God.' How is it, then, that they are so misled? (87)

وَقِيلِهِۦ يَـٰرَبِّ إِنَّ هَـٰٓؤُلَآءِ قَوْمٌ لَّا يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿٨٨﴾

And [the Prophet] says: 'My Lord, these are people who will not believe.' (88)

فَٱصْفَحْ عَنْهُمْ وَقُلْ سَلَـٰمٌ ۚ فَسَوْفَ يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٨٩﴾

Still, bear with them and say, 'Peace,' for in time they will come to know. (89)

Overview

In this final passage, the *sūrah* picks up the legends the pagan Arabs weaved around their worship of angels. It refers to one of the arguments they used to defend their absurd beliefs. It was a futile argument that reflected no attempt to arrive at the truth; it was more an exercise in polemics. They had been told that both they and what they worshipped were bound for hell. The reference here being to their idols that were

first intended as representations of angels, but which were later worshipped as deities. They were told that whoever worshipped anything other than God will be in hell together with the thing worshipped. In response, some of them cited the example of Jesus, who was worshipped by some of those who deviated from true Christianity. They asked whether Jesus would also be in hell? This was nothing but idle argument. They also claimed that they were better guided than the Christians who worshipped Jesus, a human being, while they worshipped the angels, God's daughters. All this was no more than compounded falsehood. In connection with this, the *sūrah* gives an account of Jesus, explaining the truth about him and his message, and the differences that gripped his people both before and after him.

Addressing all those who deviate from the true faith, the *sūrah* warns them against the sudden coming of the Last Hour. It moves on to portray a long scene of the Day of Judgement, giving an image of lasting happiness for the God-fearing and one of painful suffering for the guilty. Furthermore, the *sūrah* negates their legends concerning the angels, makes it clear that God is free of all that they allege concerning Him and outlines some of His attributes, including His complete ownership of both this life and the life to come. The *sūrah* concludes with a directive to the Prophet to be forbearing and to turn away from the unbelievers. They will come to know what is there to be known. This is an implicit warning to those who continue to argue after things have been made very clear.

Arguing About Jesus

Whenever the son of Mary is cited as an example, your people raise an outcry, saying: 'Who is better: our deities or he?' They cite him only to challenge you. They are contentious people. He was but a servant of Ours whom We had favoured and made an example to the Children of Israel. Had it been Our will, We could have made you angels, succeeding one another on earth. He is a portent of the Last Hour. Have no doubt about it, but follow Me: this is a straight path. Let not Satan debar you; for he is your sworn enemy. When Jesus came with clear signs, he said: 'I have come to you with wisdom,

> *and to make clear to you some of that on which you differ. Therefore, fear God and follow me. God is my Lord and your Lord: so worship Him alone. This is a straight path. Yet are the sects at variance among themselves. Woe, then, to the wrongdoers for the painful suffering that will befall them on a grievous day.* (Verses 57–65)

In his biography of the Prophet, Ibn Isḥāq gives the following report:

> The Prophet sat with al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah in the Sacred Mosque, and they were joined by al-Naḍr ibn al-Ḥārith. There were a few other men from the Quraysh. The Prophet spoke to them, but al-Naḍr interrupted him. The Prophet argued with him until he silenced him. He then read to them a passage of the Qur'ān that included the verse that says: "*You and all that you were wont to worship instead of God are but the fuel of hell: that is what you are destined for.*" (21: 98) The Prophet then left.
>
> Then came 'Abdullāh ibn al-Ziba'rī of the Tamīm tribe who sat with them. Al-Walīd said to him: 'Al-Naḍr was no match for Muḥammad. Indeed Muḥammad said that both we and the deities we worship will be the fuel of hell.' Ibn al-Ziba'rī said: 'Had I been the one who argued with him I would have won. Ask Muḥammad whether everyone worshipped other than God will be in hell together with those worshipping him. Well, we worship the angels, and the Jews worship Ezra, while the Christians worship Jesus, son of Mary.' Al-Walīd and those who were in the Mosque admired what Ibn al-Ziba'rī had said and felt that he put forward a winning argument. When this was mentioned to the Prophet, he said: 'Anyone who likes to be worshipped in place of God will be joined to those who worship him. These people only worship Satan and whoever Satan orders them to worship.' God then revealed the verse that says: "*But those for whom [the decree of] ultimate good has already gone forth from Us will be kept far away from that hell.*" (21: 101) This means that Jesus, Ezra and other rabbis and priests who were sincere in their faith, but were then worshipped as deities by later people will be safe from hell.

> Furthermore, concerning the argument about Jesus being worshipped and the admiration of the argument by al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah and others, God revealed the verse that says: "*Whenever the son of Mary is cited as an example, your people raise an outcry.*" (Verse 57)

In *al-Kashshāf*, a commentary on the Qur'ān, al-Zamakhsharī gives a broadly similar report, without mentioning its source. Both reports show clearly how argumentative the pagan Arabs were. They were exactly as the Qur'ān describes them: "*They are contentious people*". (Verse 58) They were certainly skilful in dispute. They realized what the Qur'ān and the Prophet meant, but they tried hard to twist its meaning, indulged in polemics, exploiting the fact that the Qur'ānic statement was general in its implication. This is characteristic of everyone who is devoid of sincerity, seeking to manipulate words and phrases in order to twist what was a clear meaning. Therefore, the Prophet strictly prohibited contentious arguments. Abū Umāmah, a Companion of the Prophet, reports: "The Prophet came out once only to find some people involved in argument concerning the Qur'ān. He was so angry that he looked as though vinegar had been poured over his face. He then said to them: 'Do not argue about God's book citing parts of it against other parts. No community strays into error unless they are given to contentious argument.' He then quoted the Qur'ānic verse that says: '*They cite him only to challenge you. They are contentious people.*' (Verse 58)

Another possible interpretation of the statement, "*Who is better: our deities or he?*" is supported by the general drift of the verses referring to their legend about the angels. What they meant is that their worship of the angels is better than the Christians' worship of Jesus, because the angels are closer to God in their nature and descent. Exalted is God above all that they allege. Thus, the statement, '*They cite him only to challenge you. They are contentious people*', serves as a reply to Ibn al-Ziba'rī as suggested earlier. Moreover, it means that their citing of what the Christians worship is invalid, because it deviates from the truth of God's oneness. It is not right to compare one deviation from the truth with another; they are all false. This interpretation is reasonable.

Hence, the *sūrah* makes the following comment: "*He was but a servant of Ours whom We had favoured and made an example to the Children of Israel.*" (Verse 59) He was no deity to be worshipped, even though some Christians deviated from the true path and did worship him. He was only a favoured servant of God, and no blame attaches to him for the fact that people worshipped him. God granted him favours so that he would be an example for the Children of Israel to follow. However, they forgot the lesson and went astray.

The *sūrah* discusses the Arabs' legend about the angels, making it clear that they are part of God's creation. Had God willed, He would have made the angels succeed them on earth, or He would have transformed some people into angels to succeed them: "*Had it been Our will, We could have made you angels, succeeding one another on earth.*" (Verse 60) All questions of creation are determined by God; whatever He wills to create will surely come into existence. None of His creation has any relation to Him other than that of a created being with its Creator, a servant with its Master.

Another statement about Jesus reminds them of the Last Hour which they denied: "*He is a portent of the Last Hour. Have no doubt about it, but follow Me: this is a straight path. Let not Satan debar you; for he is your sworn enemy.*" (Verses 61–62) A number of the Prophet's statements speak of Jesus' second coming, a short time before the Last Hour. This is perhaps what is indicated in the statement: '*He is a portent of the Last Hour.*' It means that he informs of its approach. Abū Hurayrah quotes the Prophet as saying: "By Him who holds my soul in His hand, the son of Mary is about to come back among you, serving as a just arbiter. He will break the cross, kill the pig and abolish tribute money. Wealth will be so abundant that no one will accept money. Indeed one prostration before God will be better than this whole world and all that it contains." [Related by Mālik, al-Bukhārī, Muslim and Abū Dāwūd.] Jābir quotes the Prophet as saying: "A group of my community will ever continue to fight, holding on to the truth, until the Day of Judgement. Jesus, son of Mary, will then come down and their commander will say to him: 'Come and lead us in prayer.' He will reply: 'No. Some of you lead others.' This is just an aspect of honour God has granted to this community." [Related by Muslim.]

All this belongs to the realm beyond our perception. We are informed of it by the Prophet who tells the truth and references to it are given in the Qur'ān. No human being has any say in this other than what has been stated in these two sources.

"*He is a portent of the Last Hour. Have no doubt about it, but follow Me: this is a straight path.*" (Verse 61) They had strong doubts about the coming of the Last Hour, but the Qur'ān calls on them to be certain of it. Likewise, they steered away from guidance and the Qur'ān urges them, through God's messenger, to follow him along the straight path which ensures that its travellers will not go astray. It makes it clear to them that their deviation is only the result of their following Satan when they would be better advised to follow God's messenger: "*Let not Satan debar you; for he is your sworn enemy.*" (Verse 62) The Qur'ān always reminds people of the on-going battle between them and Satan that has been raging since the time of Adam, their first father, and the first encounter in heaven. No one can be more heedless than one who knows that a watchful, sworn enemy is deliberately waiting for a chance to attack him and yet does not take care to protect himself. On the contrary, he moves closer to the determined enemy and even follows his lead.

Islam places man in the midst of this ever-raging battle with Satan. It assigns to him gains that are beyond anyone's imagination, should he be victorious. Likewise, his loss, should he be defeated, is beyond anyone's reckoning. Thus, Islam steers man's fighting ability to this on-going battle which asserts the humanity of man, giving him his special position among the rest of creatures. Thus, the highest aim for man on earth is to achieve victory against his enemy, Satan. Once he does, he overcomes evil and wickedness and establishes firm roots of goodness and purity.

The *sūrah* now speaks about Jesus, stating the truth about him and what he preached, and how his people differed about him, both before and after his time:

> *When Jesus came with clear signs, he said: 'I have come to you with wisdom, and to make clear to you some of that on which you differ. Therefore, fear God and follow me. God is my Lord and your Lord:*

> *so worship Him alone. This is a straight path. Yet are the sects at variance among themselves. Woe, then, to the wrongdoers for the painful suffering that will befall them on a grievous day.* (Verses 63–65)

Thus, Jesus came to his people with clear signs, whether miracles God granted him or teachings that lead along the right way. He said to his people: '*I have come to you with wisdom*'. Whoever is granted wisdom is indeed granted much of what is good, and he is safe and assured of his way. Jesus' mission also clarified for them some of the questions over which they differed. Indeed, they differed on many aspects of the law of Moses, allowing their variances to split them into hostile factions. Jesus also invited them to maintain their fear of God and to obey him in the Divine message he delivered to them. He declared the principle of God's oneness in full clarity, admitting no compromise in it: "*God is my Lord and your Lord: so worship Him alone.*" (Verse 64) He never said that he was God, nor that he was God's son. He never made any reference to any relationship between him and God other than that of his being God's servant. Furthermore, he stated that his message demarcated a straight path without bend or error. Yet those who came after him disputed much, splitting into factions like those who preceded him. In this they were wrongdoers, relying on no sure information. Hence, the warning: "*Woe, then, to the wrongdoers for the painful suffering that will befall them on a grievous day.*" (Verse 65)

Jesus' message was addressed to the Children of Israel. They were awaiting his coming to save them from their humiliating bondage to the Romans. Yet when he came, they denied and opposed him. Indeed, they even plotted to get him crucified. Jesus found them divided into numerous sects, the most important of which were as follows:

1. The Sadducees, named after Zadok, whose family retained custody of the Temple since the time of David and Solomon. According to their law, he must have been a descendant of Aaron, Moses' brother. For, custody of the Temple belonged to Aaron's descendants. Holding such an office, they were very strict on detailed worship rituals, denouncing any deviation. Nevertheless,

in personal matters, they were lax, enjoying life's pleasures. They denied the Day of Resurrection.

2. The Pharisees. They were in dispute with the Sadducees, objecting to their strict observation of worship rituals while denying the Day of Resurrection. Their most common characteristic was their disregard of worldly pleasures, even though some of them took pride in their knowledge. Jesus denounced such an attitude.
3. The Samaritans. They were a mixture of Jews and Assyrians. They believed only in the Pentateuch, or the first five books of the Old Testament. They denied the later books accepted by other Jews as part of their scripture.
4. The Essenes, or Essenians. These were influenced by some philosophical doctrines, living in isolation of other Jewish sects. Theirs was an ascetic, strictly organized sect.

In addition, there were numerous other sects that gave rise to much confusion in Jewish beliefs and traditions. The Jews at the time tolerated humiliation under the Romans, and awaited their deliverance at the hands of the Messiah. When the Messiah, Jesus Christ, came to them declaring that '*God is my Lord and your Lord: so worship Him alone*', and preaching a law of tolerance and spiritualism, he was opposed by the professional clerics who gave paramount importance to rituals. He is reported to have said about them: "They make loads that are hard to carry and lay them on the shoulders of the people. However, they are not willing to lift a finger to move them. They do everything to attract people's attention. They make their headbands large and the tassels on their shawls long. They love the place of honour at dinners and the front seats in synagogues. They love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have people call them Rabbi." (Matthew 23: 4–7) He is also quoted as addressing them thus: "You, blind guides! You strain gnats out of your wine, but you swallow camels. How horrible it will be for you, scribes and Pharisees! You hypocrites! You clean the outsides of cups and dishes. But inside they are full of greed and uncontrolled desires. You blind Pharisees! First clean the inside of the cups and dishes so that the outside may also be clean. How horrible it will be for you, scribes

and Pharisees! You hypocrites! You are like whitewashed graves that look beautiful on the outside but inside are full of dead people's bones and every kind of impurity."[3] (Matthew 23: 24–27)

When we read today these words of Jesus (peace be upon him) and similar texts, we realize how applicable they are to professional clerics of all religions. They are all of the same type.

Jesus' term on earth came to its end and he went to his Lord. Later, his followers split into groups and factions: some made him a deity; some made him the son of God; others make God a trinity of three one of whom is Jesus. The pure concept of God's oneness preached by Jesus has, thus, been lost, as also his call on people to worship God alone, pure in their submission to Him.[4]

"*Yet are the sects at variance among themselves. Woe, then, to the wrongdoers for the painful suffering that will befall them on a grievous day.*" (Verse 65) Then the pagan Arabs disputed with the Prophet concerning Jesus, basing their argument on what these different factions fabricated and weaved of legends about him.

Waiting for the Last Hour

When the *sūrah* refers to wrongdoers, it includes those factions that disputed about Jesus together with the pagan Arabs who argued with the Prophet on the basis of what those factions perpetrated. It draws a long, spectacular scene showing what happens to them on the Day of Judgement and adds an image of what happens to the God-fearing who receive His favours in heaven:

> *What are they waiting for other than the Last Hour, which will come upon them all of a sudden and take them unawares? On that Day, friends will become enemies to one another, except for the God-fearing.*

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3. The information given here about Jewish sects and the subsequent quotations are based on Al-Aqqād, 'Abbās Maḥmūd, *'Abqariyyat al-Masīḥ*, Cairo, (n.d.).

4. A more detailed discussion of this is given in *In the Shade of the Qur'ān*, Vol. XIII, pp. 178–180.

desire. However, what comes over and above desire satisfaction is that it is all pleasant to the eye, adding beauty to gratification: "*They will be waited upon with trays and goblets of gold; and there will be found all that the souls may desire and the eyes may delight in.*" (Verse 71) Yet there is more to this blessed enjoyment: there is something greater and far more honourable. They are honoured by an address from on high: "*There you shall abide. This is the garden that shall be your own on account of what you used to do. You shall have there fruits in abundance, from which to eat.*" (Verses 71–73)

What fate awaits the evildoers whom we left a little while ago in dispute, blaming one another? "*The evildoers shall abide in the suffering of hell.*" (Verse 74) It is a permanent, hard and severe suffering that allows no reduction or respite. No ray of hope will ever appear nor any chance of deliverance. They endure it, lost in despair: "*It will not be lightened for them; they will remain in utter despair.*" (Verse 75) This is all their own doing. No one has wronged them: "*We never wronged them; it was they who have wronged themselves.*" (Verse 76)

An outcry is heard from afar. It is an outcry of utter distress, born in despair: "*They will cry, 'Mālik, if only your Lord would put an end to us!'*" (Verse 77) It comes from down below, from behind the closed doors of hell. The evildoers are not appealing for help or salvation; they have already despaired of that. All they are asking for is that they should be allowed to perish, their misery end. That is all that they can hope for. When all that one can hope for is to perish, one must be in extreme distress. This cry certainly comes from long-suffering souls and bodies whose endurance has gone beyond all limits. Hence they cry out: "*Mālik, if only your Lord would put an end to us!'*" The answer they are given adds to their despair, caring little for what they feel: "*He will answer: 'You are here to stay.'*" (Verse 77) No deliverance, no hope, no death, no end; they are there to stay.

This distressing image is followed by an address to those who hate the truth and turn away from guidance. It portrays to all how singular their attitude is:

> *We have brought the truth to you, but most of you abhor the truth. If they have resolved on some scheme, We have a scheme of Our*

> *own. Or do they think that We do not hear their secret talk and their private counsel? Indeed We do, and Our messengers are with them, recording all.* (Verses 78–80)

It is their abhorrence of the truth that prevented them from following it. It is not that they did not realize that it is the truth. Nor did they doubt the honesty and sincerity of the Prophet; they had long known him, acknowledging that he never told a lie. How could he, then, lie to God saying about Him what was false? In most cases, those who oppose the truth are not unaware that it is the truth; they simply hate it because it conflicts with their desires. They are too weak to resist their desires, but they can always attempt to suppress the truth and persecute its advocates. It is from this, their weakness, that they derive the audacity to stand against the truth.

Therefore, the Almighty who knows all their secrets and scheming warns them: "*If they have resolved on some scheme, We have a scheme of Our own. Or do they think that We do not hear their secret talk and their private counsel? Indeed We do, and Our messengers are with them, recording all.*" (Verses 79–80) Their persistent support of falsehood against the truth is countered by God's clear will to establish and strengthen the truth; and their wicked scheming under the cover of darkness is countered by God's knowledge of all secret whispering. When weak creatures stand against the Almighty, All-Knowing Creator, the outcome is a forgone conclusion.

In Heaven and on Earth

Now the Qur'ān directs the Prophet to say something to them and to leave them to face the destiny which has already been described to them:

> *Say: 'If the Lord of Grace had a son, I would be the first to worship him.' Limitless in His glory is the Lord of the heavens and earth, the Lord of the Throne: He is far above their false descriptions. Leave them to indulge in idle talk and play until they face the Day they have been promised.* (Verses 81–83)

They alleged that the angels whom they worshipped were God's daughters. Had God had any offspring, the first one to know this and act on the basis of this knowledge was God's Prophet and messenger. He was close to Him and was quick to comply with His orders. He would have been the first to offer his respects to His offspring, had He had any as they alleged. He, however, worships none but God. This in itself is evidence confirming that their allegation has no basis. All glory belongs to God who is totally unlike what they allege. "*Limitless in His glory is the Lord of the heavens and earth, the Lord of the Throne: He is far above their false descriptions.*" (Verse 82)

When we contemplate the heavens and the earth, looking at their systems and harmony, we feel the greatness and sublimity of the One who controls all this, referred to as, '*the Lord of the Throne*,' and we realize the absurdity of any such claim. By our nature we know that the Maker of the universe can have no similarity to creatures who procreate. Therefore, attributing sons and daughters to Him appears to be no more than idle talk and play, which deserve no answer. It only merits a stern warning of what happens on the Day of Resurrection, an image of which has already been given: "*Leave them to indulge in idle talk and play until they face the Day they have been promised.*" (Verse 83)

The *sūrah* continues its glorification of God, the Creator, attributing to Him what is worthy of His Lordship of the heavens and the earth as well as the mighty throne:

> *It is He alone who is God in heaven and God on earth; He alone is the Wise, the All-Knowing. Blessed is He to whom sovereignty over the heavens and the earth and all that is between them belongs, and with whom the knowledge of the Last Hour rests, and to whom you shall be brought back. Those whom they invoke beside Him have no power of intercession, unlike those who know the truth and bear witness to it.* (Verses 84–86)

This statement confirms the unity of Godhead throughout the universe, making it clear that no one shares this with God Almighty who does everything according to His infinite wisdom and perfect

knowledge. The Arabic word *tabārak*, translated here as 'blessed', carries connotations of greatness and exaltedness above all their perceptions. It is He who is '*the Lord of the heavens and the earth and all in between*'. He alone knows the timing of the Last Hour and to Him all creation returns. On that day, when all return to Him, none of those whom they allege as His offspring or partners will have the power of intercession for anyone. None can intercede with Him other than one who knows the truth and bears witness to it. A person who testifies to the truth will not intercede on behalf of any who ever stood in opposition to it.

The *sūrah* then confronts them with something that is ingrained in their nature and concerning which they have no doubt. That is, their Creator is God. How, then, can they associate partners with Him in their worship, and how can they expect that anyone will intercede on behalf of anyone who associated partners with Him: "*Yet if you ask them who created them they are sure to answer, 'God'. How is it, then, that they are so misled?*" (Verse 87) How can they ignore the truth testified to by their own nature? How can they allow their behaviour to be in conflict with its inevitable result?

As the *sūrah* comes to its close, it highlights the fact that the Prophet turns to his Lord complaining of their rejection of the truth and their disbelief: "*And [the Prophet] says: 'My Lord, these are people who will not believe.'*" (Verse 88) This is given in a special form that implies how keenly the Prophet felt this and how well God received it. The answer from on high is a directive to the Prophet to bear with them and not to care for their rejection. On the contrary, he should forbear and feel his heart content. To this is added an implicit warning to those determined opponents of the truth: "*Still, bear with them and say, 'Peace,' for in time they will come to know.*" (Verse 89) The time will come when everything is exposed and they will then know the dreadful fate that awaits them.

SŪRAH 44

Al-Dukhān

(Smoke)

Prologue

Characterized by its short and rhyming verses, violent images and inspirational shades of meaning, this *sūrah* strikes like a hammer, its beat directed at making every human heart tremble. The entire *sūrah* appears to be a single whole, with one central theme to which all its elements are tied: the story the scene from the Day of Judgement, the fate of earlier communities, its depiction of the universe and the direct discussion of God's oneness, people's resurrection and God's message.

The *sūrah* begins with a reference to the Qur'ān and its revelation on a blessed night when every matter of wisdom is made clear. Its revelation is an act of mercy for mankind, as well as a warning to them. Moreover, it tells people about their Lord, the Lord of the heavens and the earth and all between them, confirming His oneness. He is the One who gives life and deals death, the Lord of everyone who lived and everyone who will come to life.

The *sūrah* abandons this thread in order to speak about the people addressed by the Qur'ān: "*Yet they remain in doubt, playing about.*" (Verse 9) It issues a swift but stern warning against such doubt and play: "*Wait, then, for the Day when the skies shall bring forth a kind of smoke which will make things clear. It will envelope the people. Grievous*

is this suffering!" (Verses 10–11) On the day when this suffering befalls them, they will pray for it to be lifted, but once it comes it will not be removed. They are reminded that such suffering has not as yet been inflicted. They should, therefore, seize the opportunity now before they are returned to their Lord when this fearful suffering falls due: "*On that Day We shall deliver a mighty onslaught; We will indeed exact retribution.*" (Verse 16)

The *sūrah* tells them about Pharaoh and the end he and his people met when a noble messenger from God came and appealed to them: "*Give in to me, you servants of God! For, I am indeed a messenger sent to you, worthy of trust! Do not exalt yourselves against God.*" (Verses 18–19) However, they refused to take heed until God's messenger despaired of their ever responding. They were destroyed after having behaved with insolence: "*How many gardens did they leave behind, and how many fountains, and fields of grain, and noble dwellings, and good things in which they used to delight! Thus it was. And We made other people inherit it all. Neither heaven nor earth shed tears over them, nor were they allowed a respite.*" (Verses 25–29)

Against this backdrop the *sūrah* reverts to their denial of the life to come. They said: "*We shall die but one death, and we shall not be raised to life again. Bring back our forefathers, if what you claim be true.*" (Verses 35–36) They are reminded of the fate suffered by the people of Tubba' and are told that they are no better than they were. Therefore, they will not be spared a similar fate.

The *sūrah* also makes it clear that there is a link between resurrection and God's wisdom manifested in the creation of the heavens and the earth: "*We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them in mere idle play. We created them all for nothing other than a true purpose, but most of them do not understand.*" (Verses 38–39) It then tells them about the Day of Decision, which is the time appointed for all of them. It adds here a violent scene depicting the suffering of the guilty who are made to eat of the Zaqqūm tree. It shows them how a sinful person is dragged into the midst of the blazing fire, where scalding water is poured over his head in recompense for his sins: "*Taste this, you powerful and honourable man! This is the very thing you surely doubted.*" (Verses 49–50)

Side by side with this scene is an image of the blessings enjoyed in heaven by the God-fearing. This is a profound image, one that contrasts with the great suffering endured by the other group, and fits with the strong beat of the *sūrah*. This then ends with another reference to the Qur'ān, coupled with a strong and implicit warning: "*We have made this Qur'ān easy to understand, in your own language, so that they may take heed. Wait, then; they too are waiting.*" (Verses 58–59)

From start to finish the *sūrah* uses a continuous and fast beat, and puts before the human mind a succession of images and impressions that are characteristically powerful. It takes us on a long journey that includes the heavens and the earth, the present world and the next, heaven and hell, the past and the present, life and death, the laws of creation and those of the universe, of worlds that are perceptible as well as those that are imperceptible. Relatively short as it is, the *sūrah* provides a grand tour of the world around us and of that which lies beyond our perceptive faculties.

I

Smoke That Ushers Clarity

Al-Dukhān (Smoke)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

Ḥā. Mīm. (1)

By the Book that makes things clear! (2)

We have bestowed it from on high on a blessed night; for, indeed, We have always sent warnings. (3)

On that night every matter of wisdom is made clear (4)

by Our command; for, indeed, We have always sent messages [of guidance] (5)

as a mercy from your Lord. He alone is the One who hears all and knows all; (6)

رَحْمَةً مِّن رَّبِّكَ إِنَّهُۥ هُوَ ٱلسَّمِيعُ
ٱلْعَلِيمُ ﴿٦﴾

the Lord of the heavens and the earth and all that is between them, if only you were firm believers. (7)

رَبِّ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَآ
إِن كُنتُم مُّوقِنِينَ ﴿٧﴾

There is no deity other than Him; He gives life and deals death. He is your Lord and the Lord of your earliest ancestors. (8)

لَآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ يُحْيِۦ وَيُمِيتُ رَبُّكُمْ
وَرَبُّ ءَابَآئِكُمُ ٱلْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿٨﴾

Yet they remain in doubt, playing about. (9)

بَلْ هُمْ فِى شَكٍّ يَلْعَبُونَ ﴿٩﴾

Wait, then, for the Day when the skies shall bring forth a kind of smoke which will make things clear. (10)

فَٱرْتَقِبْ يَوْمَ تَأْتِى ٱلسَّمَآءُ بِدُخَانٍ
مُّبِينٍ ﴿١٠﴾

It will envelope the people. Grievous is this suffering! (11)

يَغْشَى ٱلنَّاسَ هَٰذَا عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ﴿١١﴾

[They will cry]: 'Our Lord! Relieve us from this suffering; for, indeed, we are believers.' (12)

رَّبَّنَا ٱكْشِفْ عَنَّا ٱلْعَذَابَ
إِنَّا مُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿١٢﴾

How will this remembrance benefit them? A messenger who clearly explained things had previously come to them; (13)

أَنَّىٰ لَهُمُ ٱلذِّكْرَىٰ وَقَدْ جَآءَهُمْ
رَسُولٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿١٣﴾

ثُمَّ تَوَلَّوْا عَنْهُ وَقَالُوا مُعَلَّمٌ مَّجْنُونٌ ﴿١٤﴾

but they turned their backs on him and said: 'He is taught by others, a madman!' (14)

إِنَّا كَاشِفُوا الْعَذَابِ قَلِيلًا ۚ إِنَّكُمْ
عَائِدُونَ ﴿١٥﴾

We shall remove this suffering for a while; but you are bound to revert [to your old ways]. (15)

يَوْمَ نَبْطِشُ الْبَطْشَةَ الْكُبْرَىٰ
إِنَّا مُنتَقِمُونَ ﴿١٦﴾

On that Day We shall deliver a mighty onslaught; We will indeed exact retribution. (16)

وَلَقَدْ فَتَنَّا قَبْلَهُمْ قَوْمَ فِرْعَوْنَ
وَجَاءَهُمْ رَسُولٌ كَرِيمٌ ﴿١٧﴾

We did, before their time, try Pharaoh's people: there came to them a noble messenger, (17)

أَنْ أَدُّوا إِلَيَّ عِبَادَ اللَّهِ ۖ إِنِّي لَكُمْ رَسُولٌ
أَمِينٌ ﴿١٨﴾

who said to them: 'Give in to me, you servants of God! For, I am indeed a messenger sent to you, worthy of trust! (18)

وَأَن لَّا تَعْلُوا عَلَى اللَّهِ ۖ إِنِّي آتِيكُم
بِسُلْطَانٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿١٩﴾

Do not exalt yourselves against God; for, indeed, I come to you with manifest authority. (19)

وَإِنِّي عُذْتُ بِرَبِّي وَرَبِّكُمْ أَن تَرْجُمُونِ ﴿٢٠﴾

I seek refuge with my Lord and your Lord lest you hurl stones at me. (20)

وَإِن لَّمْ تُؤْمِنُوا لِي فَاعْتَزِلُونِ ﴿٢١﴾

If you do not believe me, stand away from me.' (21)

فَدَعَا رَبَّهُۥٓ أَنَّ هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ قَوْمٌ مُّجْرِمُونَ ﴿٢٢﴾

He then called out to his Lord, saying: 'These people are lost in sin.' (22)

فَأَسْرِ بِعِبَادِى لَيْلًا إِنَّكُم مُّتَّبَعُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

And [God said]: 'Set forth with My servants by night, for you will surely be pursued; (23)

وَٱتْرُكِ ٱلْبَحْرَ رَهْوًا ۖ إِنَّهُمْ جُندٌ مُّغْرَقُونَ ﴿٢٤﴾

and leave the sea calm behind you; for their host are destined to be drowned.' (24)

كَمْ تَرَكُوا۟ مِن جَنَّٰتٍ وَعُيُونٍ ﴿٢٥﴾

How many gardens did they leave behind, and how many fountains, (25)

وَزُرُوعٍ وَمَقَامٍ كَرِيمٍ ﴿٢٦﴾

and fields of grain, and noble dwellings, (26)

وَنَعْمَةٍ كَانُوا۟ فِيهَا فَٰكِهِينَ ﴿٢٧﴾

and good things in which they used to delight! (27)

كَذَٰلِكَ ۖ وَأَوْرَثْنَٰهَا قَوْمًا ءَاخَرِينَ ﴿٢٨﴾

Thus it was. And We made other people inherit it all. (28)

فَمَا بَكَتْ عَلَيْهِمُ ٱلسَّمَآءُ وَٱلْأَرْضُ وَمَا كَانُوا۟ مُنظَرِينَ ﴿٢٩﴾

Neither heaven nor earth shed tears over them, nor were they allowed a respite. (29)

وَلَقَدْ نَجَّيْنَا بَنِىٓ إِسْرَٰٓءِيلَ مِنَ ٱلْعَذَابِ ٱلْمُهِينِ ﴿٣٠﴾

We saved the Children of Israel from humiliating suffering, (30)

مِن فِرْعَوْنَ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ كَانَ عَالِيًا مِّنَ ٱلْمُسْرِفِينَ ﴿٣١﴾

from Pharaoh, who was arrogant and a transgressor. (31)

We chose them knowingly above all other people. (32)

وَلَقَدِ ٱخْتَرْنَٰهُمْ عَلَىٰ عِلْمٍ عَلَى
ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ٣٢

And We gave them signs in which there was a clear test. (33)

وَءَاتَيْنَٰهُم مِّنَ ٱلْءَايَٰتِ مَا فِيهِ بَلَٰٓؤٌا۟
مُّبِينٌ ٣٣

Now these people assert: (34)

إِنَّ هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ لَيَقُولُونَ ٣٤

'We shall die but one death, and we shall not be raised to life again. (35)

إِنْ هِىَ إِلَّا مَوْتَتُنَا ٱلْأُولَىٰ وَمَا نَحْنُ
بِمُنشَرِينَ ٣٥

Bring back our forefathers, if what you claim be true.' (36)

فَأْتُوا۟ بِـَٔابَآئِنَآ إِن كُنتُمْ صَٰدِقِينَ ٣٦

Are they better than the people of Tubba' and those before them, whom We destroyed because they were lost in sin? (37)

أَهُمْ خَيْرٌ أَمْ قَوْمُ تُبَّعٍ وَٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِهِمْ
أَهْلَكْنَٰهُمْ إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا۟ مُجْرِمِينَ ٣٧

We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them in mere idle play. (38)

وَمَا خَلَقْنَا ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضَ
وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا لَٰعِبِينَ ٣٨

We created them all for nothing other than a true purpose, but most of them do not understand. (39)

مَا خَلَقْنَٰهُمَآ إِلَّا بِٱلْحَقِّ وَلَٰكِنَّ
أَكْثَرَهُمْ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ٣٩

The Day of Decision is the time appointed for all of them. (40)

إِنَّ يَوْمَ ٱلْفَصْلِ مِيقَٰتُهُمْ أَجْمَعِينَ ٤٠

It is a day when no friend shall be of the least avail to his friend, and when none shall receive support (41)

يَوْمَ لَا يُغْنِي مَوْلًى عَن مَّوْلًى شَيْـًٔا وَلَا هُمْ يُنصَرُونَ ﴿٤١﴾

except those upon whom God will have bestowed His grace and mercy. He alone is the Almighty, the Ever-Merciful. (42)

إِلَّا مَن رَّحِمَ ٱللَّهُ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ هُوَ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ﴿٤٢﴾

The fruit of the Zaqqūm tree (43)

إِنَّ شَجَرَتَ ٱلزَّقُّومِ ﴿٤٣﴾

will be the food of the sinful; (44)

طَعَامُ ٱلْأَثِيمِ ﴿٤٤﴾

like molten lead will it boil in the belly, (45)

كَٱلْمُهْلِ يَغْلِى فِى ٱلْبُطُونِ ﴿٤٥﴾

like the boiling of scalding water. (46)

كَغَلْىِ ٱلْحَمِيمِ ﴿٤٦﴾

'Take him, and drag him into the midst of the blazing fire; (47)

خُذُوهُ فَٱعْتِلُوهُ إِلَىٰ سَوَآءِ ٱلْجَحِيمِ ﴿٤٧﴾

then pour over his head the suffering of scalding water! (48)

ثُمَّ صُبُّوا۟ فَوْقَ رَأْسِهِۦ مِنْ عَذَابِ ٱلْحَمِيمِ ﴿٤٨﴾

Taste this, you powerful and honourable man! (49)

ذُقْ إِنَّكَ أَنتَ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلْكَرِيمُ ﴿٤٩﴾

This is the very thing you surely doubted.' (50)

إِنَّ هَٰذَا مَا كُنتُم بِهِۦ تَمْتَرُونَ ﴿٥٠﴾

The God-fearing will certainly be in a safe position, (51)

إِنَّ ٱلْمُتَّقِينَ فِى مَقَامٍ أَمِينٍ ﴿٥١﴾

amid gardens and fountains, (52)

فِى جَنَّٰتٍ وَعُيُونٍ ﴿٥٢﴾

wearing garments of silk and brocade, facing one another. (53)

يَلْبَسُونَ مِن سُندُسٍ وَإِسْتَبْرَقٍ مُّتَقَٰبِلِينَ ﴿٥٣﴾

Thus shall it be. And We shall pair them with pure companions with most beautiful eyes. (54)

كَذَٰلِكَ وَزَوَّجْنَٰهُم بِحُورٍ عِينٍ ﴿٥٤﴾

There they can call for every kind of fruit, enjoying peace and security. (55)

يَدْعُونَ فِيهَا بِكُلِّ فَٰكِهَةٍ ءَامِنِينَ ﴿٥٥﴾

They shall not taste death there, having had their one death. He will have preserved them from suffering through the blazing fire, (56)

لَا يَذُوقُونَ فِيهَا ٱلْمَوْتَ إِلَّا ٱلْمَوْتَةَ ٱلْأُولَىٰ ۖ وَوَقَىٰهُمْ عَذَابَ ٱلْجَحِيمِ ﴿٥٦﴾

an act of your Lord's favour. That is the supreme triumph. (57)

فَضْلًا مِّن رَّبِّكَ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ هُوَ ٱلْفَوْزُ ٱلْعَظِيمُ ﴿٥٧﴾

We have made this Qur'ān easy to understand, in your own language, so that they may take heed. (58)

فَإِنَّمَا يَسَّرْنَٰهُ بِلِسَانِكَ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿٥٨﴾

Wait, then; they too are waiting. (59)

فَٱرْتَقِبْ إِنَّهُم مُّرْتَقِبُونَ ﴿٥٩﴾

The Blessed Night

> Ḥā. Mīm. *By the book that makes things clear! We have bestowed it from on high on a blessed night; for, indeed, We have always sent warnings. On that night every matter of wisdom is made clear by Our command; for, indeed, We have always sent messages [of guidance] as a mercy from your Lord. He alone is the One who hears all and knows all; the Lord of the heavens and the earth and all that is between them, if only you were firm believers. There is no deity other than Him; He gives life and deals death. He is your Lord and the Lord of your earliest ancestors.* (Verses 1–8)

The *sūrah* begins with the two separate letters, *Ḥā Mīm*, making an oath by them and by the book composed of letters like them, making things clear. We have spoken elsewhere about these separate letters occurring at the beginning of a number of *sūrahs* in the Qur'ān. The point to add here is that making them the subject of an oath is just like taking an oath on the book. Every single letter, representing a sound, is a true miracle, or one of God's signs manifested in man's make-up, giving him the ability to speak. They also identify the order in which alphabetical sounds occur along the vocal tract, the symbol representing the letter and its sound, as also man's ability to gather information through them. All these are significant facts that grow in our minds when we seriously reflect on them.

What the oath asserts is the revelation of the book on a blessed night: "*We have bestowed it from on high on a blessed night; for, indeed, We have always sent warnings. On that night every matter of wisdom is made clear by Our command; for, indeed, We have always sent messages [of guidance] as a mercy from your Lord. He alone is the One who hears all and knows all.*" (Verses 3–6) The reference to the night on which the Qur'ān was bestowed from on high most probably means – although God knows best – the night when its revelation first started. It was a night during the month of Ramaḍān, which is described in the following words: "*It was in the month of Ramaḍān that the Qur'ān was revealed.*" (2: 185) The Qur'ān was not revealed in full on that night, nor was all the Qur'ān revealed during Ramaḍān. It had only

started to make contact with the earth, and that night was the first time such contact was made.

Blessed indeed is the night which brought such great goodness to mankind, allowing the Divine system to be implemented in human life, and providing people with a chance to be in touch with the major laws that govern the universe. These are given in easy translation in the Qur'ān, enabling human nature to respond to them and implement them with ease and comfort. It then enables a human community to be established, one based on the rules and responses of the nature God placed in man, living in harmony with the universe around it. It establishes a system that is naturally clean and honourable, free of unnecessary restrictions, under which man lives on earth but by which he maintains his contact with heaven.

Those who were the first to receive the Qur'ān lived during a remarkable period of history when they were in direct contact with God. He told them what they felt in different situations, making them feel, time after time, that He was looking after them. For their part, they took all this into account, in every move and action they performed, and every thought they entertained. They appealed to Him at every turn, trusting that He would always respond to them.

When that generation passed away, the Qur'ān remained an open book that directly addresses human hearts. When people open themselves to it, its effect surpasses magic. It transforms their feelings in a way that is heard of only in great legends. The Qur'ān has remained ever since a complete and clear system that can establish a model human community in any environment and at any time. What it creates is a type of human life that lives within its local environment and time and adopts the unique Islamic system with all its special qualities. This is the distinctive mark of the Divine system, and it applies to everything that God makes. Human beings make what suits them at a particular period of time and in a particular situation. God's work, on the other hand, is perfect, fulfilling all needs, suited to all times and situations, combining permanent truths with variable forms, all in perfect harmony.

God bestowed the Qur'ān from on high on that remarkable night to warn people in the first place: "*We have always sent warnings.*" (Verse 3)

The very fact that the Qur'ān was bestowed from on high on that blessed night makes this a deciding point: "*On that night every matter of wisdom is made clear.*" (Verse 4) The Qur'ān certainly set things apart, distinguishing the permanent truth from powerless falsehood. Limits were established and the road along which man should travel through life was charted. This is the road man should follow for the rest of life. Thus, none of the fundamental issues of human life are left ambiguous. Everything is made clear in the Divine message. All this has been accomplished by God's command and by His will to send messengers to clarify matters for all mankind: "*By Our command; for, indeed, We have always sent messages [of guidance].*" (Verse 5)

All this has been done as an act of mercy bestowed on mankind for all future generations up to the Day of Judgement: "*As a mercy from your Lord. He alone is the One who hears all and knows all.*" (Verse 6) Nothing manifests God's mercy like the revelation of the Qur'ān. With consummate ease, it appeals directly to people's hearts as easily as the blood flowing through their veins. In this way, it transforms man into a noble creature. With Qur'ānic guidance, human society becomes more like a dream world, yet it is there for eyes to see. The faith the Qur'ān outlines profoundly engages hearts and minds so as to be loved passionately. The question here is not one of meticulous perfection, goodness and suitability. It is much more than that. It is a scenario in which every one of these qualities is further enhanced until their perfection attains a beauty that permeates all details and combines and harmonizes them while at the same time maintaining their close links to the main body.

"*As a mercy from your Lord.*" this is how the Qur'ān was revealed on that blessed night. "*He alone is the One who hears all and knows all.*" (Verse 6) He hears and He knows. He reveals what He reveals to people on the basis of His knowledge of what they say and do, as well as what is suitable and beneficial for them of laws, regulations and directives. He is the One who is in control of the universe, taking care of all who live on it. He is "*the Lord of the heavens and the earth and all that is between them, if only you were firm believers.*" (Verse 7) The revelations He bestows from on high to mould people's lives is part of His Lordship of the universe and of His laws that operate in the universe.

The reference in this verse to firm belief implies an allusion to the unbelievers' confused beliefs. They recognized God as the Creator of the heavens and the earth but they, nevertheless, associated partners with Him. This means that the central principle of God's oneness was blurred in their minds, and this precluded them from having firm and reassured beliefs.

God is also the One who gives life and deals death, the Lord of all generations of creation: "*There is no deity other than Him; He gives life and deals death. He is your Lord and the Lord of your earliest ancestors.*" (Verse 8) Both the initiation of life and its deathly end are witnessed by all and are recognized as being beyond the power of any creature. This is clear at first sight and with simple consideration. The scene of death, like the scene of new life, touches the human heart and leaves a very strong influence on it, making it ready to respond. Hence, they are often mentioned in the Qur'ān to attract people's attention to them.

Clarifying Smoke

At this point, the *sūrah* refers to the unbelievers' own situation, which was the opposite of the seriousness with which they should have dealt with God's revelations:

> *Yet they remain in doubt, playing about. Wait, then, for the Day when the skies shall bring forth a kind of smoke which will make things clear. It will envelope the people. Grievous is this suffering! [They will cry]: 'Our Lord! Relieve us from this suffering; for, indeed, we are believers.' How will this remembrance benefit them? A messenger who clearly explained things had previously come to them; but they turned their backs on him and said: 'He is taught by others, a madman!' We shall remove this suffering for a while; but you are bound to revert [to your old ways]. On that Day We shall deliver a mighty onslaught; We will indeed exact retribution.* (Verses 9–16)

The *sūrah* tells the Prophet that they are playing about when the situation requires seriousness, and that they continue to be in doubt about God's confirmed revelations. He is, therefore, instructed to

leave them until they face a day of great hardship: "*Wait, then, for the Day when the skies shall bring forth a kind of smoke which will make things clear. It will envelope the people. Grievous is this suffering.*" (Verses 10–11)

Scholars during the early period of Islam differed in their views about what the smoke mentioned in this verse means. Some of them maintained that it will occur on the Day of Judgement, which makes the warning implied here similar to other warnings in the Qur'ān about that day. They said that this will surely take place and that the Prophet awaited it. Others said that it actually did take place just as the Qur'ān states. It was then lifted after the Prophet prayed God to so remove it.[1]

We, though, are more in agreement with the view expressed by Ibn 'Abbās and explained by Ibn Kathīr making it clear that the smoke will appear on the Day of Judgement. Similar warnings also occur elsewhere in the Qur'ān. What it means here is that these people doubt and play. Leave them, then, in anticipation of that terrible day when the skies shall bring smoke that makes things clear. As it envelops people, their suffering will be particularly painful. Their appeals for help is described thus: "*[They will cry]: 'Our Lord! Relieve us from this suffering; for, indeed, we are believers.*" (Verse 12) They are told that a positive response to their appeal is impossible. It is now too late: "*How will this remembrance benefit them? A messenger who clearly explained things had previously come to them; but they turned their backs on him and said: 'He is taught by others, a madman!'*" (Verses 13–14) They claimed that a non-Arab person or people taught the Prophet the Qur'ān, and they further alleged that Muḥammad (peace be upon him) was a madman.

Having given them this image of a time when they appeal in vain, they are told that they still have a chance, which they should not lose. While they are still in this life, their punishment is delayed. If they believe now, as they will later promise they would if returned, they

1. The author adds here lengthy quotations from *Ḥadīth* anthologies and from commentaries on the Qur'ān in support of both views. To include these in full would perhaps be tedious for an English reader. They are no more than endorsements of each of the two views, showing the evidence on which each relies. Therefore, these quotations have been omitted in this edition. – Editor's note.

will have acted whilst they have the time to prove their sincerity. Nothing is lost yet, so they better act now before they are returned to God. When they are returned to Him: "*On that Day We shall deliver a mighty onslaught,*" when the smoke envelops people. "*We will indeed exact retribution,*" for the play you indulge in and the falsehood you level at the Prophet describing him as *'taught by others, a madman',* when he is God's trusted messenger.

Drowning Pharaoh

A very brief account of the history of Moses and Pharaoh is then added. It concludes with a mighty strike in this present life, corresponding to the mighty onslaught that will strike them on the day when the skies will bring forth their smoke:

> *We did, before their time, try Pharaoh's people: there came to them a noble messenger, who said to them: 'Give in to me, you servants of God! For, I am indeed a messenger sent to you, worthy of trust! Do not exalt yourselves against God; for, indeed, I come to you with manifest authority. I seek refuge with my Lord and your Lord lest you hurl stones at me. If you do not believe me, stand away from me.' He then called out to his Lord, saying: 'These people are lost in sin.' And [God said]: 'Set forth with My servants by night, for you will surely be pursued; and leave the sea calm behind you; for their host are destined to be drowned.' How many gardens did they leave behind, and how many fountains, and fields of grain, and noble dwellings, and good things in which they used to delight! Thus it was. And We made other people inherit it all. Neither heaven nor earth shed tears over them, nor were they allowed a respite. We saved the Children of Israel from humiliating suffering, from Pharaoh, who was arrogant and a transgressor. We chose them knowingly above all other people. And We gave them signs in which there was a clear test.* (Verses 17–33)

This round starts with a strong note alerting people to the fact that when God sends a messenger to a certain community, this may represent

a special test for them. Likewise, allowing those who oppose the messenger and reject his message a period of time during which they may persist in their arrogance, persecuting the messenger and those who believe in him, may also be a special sort of test. When a community exhausts the patience of God's messenger, leaving him despairing of their ever being positive towards the Divine message, their action may incur a stern punishment: "*We did, before their time, try Pharaoh's people.*" (Verse 17) We tested them with prosperity and power in the land, as well as all means of affluence and power. "*There came to them a noble messenger.*" (Verse 17) This was a part of their test, showing how they responded to God's messenger who asked nothing for himself in return. He only called on them to believe in God and demonstrate their readiness to give everything to God, leaving nothing for themselves when it comes to sacrifice for His sake. Thus, the messenger said to them: "*Give in to me, you servants of God! For, I am indeed a messenger sent to you, worthy of trust! Do not exalt yourselves against God; for, indeed, I come to you with manifest authority. I seek refuge with my Lord and your Lord lest you hurl stones at me. If you do not believe me, stand away from me.*" (Verses 18–21)

These are clear words, in short sentences, outlining what Moses asks of his people. He is advising them to make a complete response and submit totally to God. It does not behove God's servants to exalt themselves against Him. As Moses gives them God's message, together with clear and irrefutable proof that he is God's messenger, he seeks God's help and protection should they attack him. If they persist in their erring ways, unwilling to believe in God, he asks them to leave him alone, move away from him. This is extremely fair behaviour. Tyranny, however, is rarely willing to deal in fairness. It fears should the truth remain free, approaching people peacefully. It, therefore, resorts to strong, hard tactics in its efforts to impose its absolute authority. It cannot afford for the truth to make any in-roads and thus win minds and hearts over to its side. Hence, tyranny and falsehood strike hard. They stone any advocate of the truth, seeking to persecute them in every possible way.

The *sūrah* leaves out several episodes of this story to pick up its thread as it approaches its end. Moses realizes that people will not

respond to him positively. Nor will they adopt either of the two options he offered them: accepting his status or moving away from him. He is certain that they are genuinely guilty, with no hope of their ever changing their ways. Therefore, he makes his ultimate appeal to his Lord: "*He then called out to his Lord, saying: These people are lost in sin.*" (Verse 22) What means a messenger of God has other than to submit the outcome of his efforts to his Lord? Moses presents his account and leaves matters to God to deal with as He pleases.

Moses received an endorsement from God with regard to his evaluation of his peoples' status: they were truly guilty: "*Set forth with My servants by night, for you will surely be pursued; and leave the sea calm behind you; for their host are destined to be drowned.*" (Verses 23–24) That their flight was to occur at night comes in for stronger emphasis in the Arabic text: the verb *asri*, translated as 'set forth', implies that the march must be under cover of darkness, then the verse adds the word *laylan*, meaning 'by night'. Thus they set forth stealthily, at night, unseen by Pharaoh and his watchmen. Furthermore, they were instructed not to make any disturbance in the parted sea as they crossed through it. Thus, Pharaoh and his host would be tempted to pursue them and God's will would then be as He had determined: "*Their host are destined to be drowned.*" (Verse 24) Thus, God's will is done through apparent causes, but these causes are part and parcel of His will and how it is accomplished.

The *sūrah* sums up the scene of this mass drowning in words that express God's will, which inevitably comes to pass: "*Their host are destined to be drowned.*" (Verse 24) This is followed with a comment highlighting Pharaoh's humiliation as also of those who supported his arrogant tyranny. They are utterly humiliated in a world where they behaved with all arrogance. How fitting! Those very people bowed their heads before Pharaoh, bewitched by his power, yet he is of no significance in this world. When his power is withdrawn, there is nothing he can do to regain it. No one mourns his loss.

> *How many gardens did they leave behind, and how many fountains, and fields of grain, and noble dwellings, and good things in which they used to delight! Thus it was. And We made other people inherit*

it all. Neither heaven nor earth shed tears over them, nor were they allowed a respite. (Verses 25–29)

The scene begins with an image of the splendid comfort in which they dwelled: gardens, fountains, plants, high position, honour and blessings in which they revelled. Yet all this is taken away from them, or they are removed from it, so as to give it to others. In another *sūrah*, the Qur'ān says: "*We bequeathed it all to the Children of Israel.*" (26: 59) Whilst the Children of Israel did not inherit Pharaoh's kingdom *per se*, they were nonetheless given a similar kingdom in another land. What is meant, then, is that the same kind of kingdom and blessings that were taken away from Pharaoh and his people were given to the Children of Israel.

What happened next? Those same tyrants, who had gloried in their power and who were held in awe by people, were removed altogether. None grieved for them. Neither earth nor heaven felt their loss. Nor were they given any reprieve: "*Neither heaven nor earth shed tears over them, nor were they allowed a respite.*" (Verse 29) The statement carries connotations of humiliation and total disregard. No one on earth or in heaven was sorry about how these tyrants met their end. They were crushed like ants under foot. The whole universe hated them because they had split themselves away from it. This is a universe that believes in its Lord while they denied Him. Theirs were evil souls, untouchable by the universe in which they lived. Had these tyrants felt what these words imply, they would have foreseen their own humiliation and known that the universe looks upon them as creatures apart.

This is then contrasted with an image of those who are saved and blessed with honour:

We saved the Children of Israel from humiliating suffering, from Pharaoh, who was arrogant and a transgressor. We chose them knowingly above all other people. And We gave them signs in which there was a clear test. (Verses 30–33)

It was from '*humiliating suffering*' that the Children of Israel were saved. This contrasts with the humiliation that the Egyptian tyrants

and transgressors found themselves in. They were saved "*from Pharaoh, who was arrogant and a transgressor.*" (Verse 31)

The *sūrah* then mentions the fact that God chose the Children of Israel, knowing all about them, with both their positive and negative qualities. Yet He chose them in preference to all other people in their own time. God knew that they were, at the time, the best people to be given the trust. This despite all that He has mentioned in the Qur'ān about their deviation and slow response. Perhaps God made His choice on the basis that whilst they did not then attain the high standard of faith He required, they would nonetheless be the best under a faithful leadership that led them along the straight path of faith and insight.

"*And We gave them signs in which there was a clear test.*" (Verse 33) Thus, in turn, the Children of Israel were tested by means of these signs. When the test was over and their time in charge came to its end, God punished them for their deviation and evil. It was as a result of this test that God abandoned them; indeed, they were smashed by those who left them in their Diaspora. They were to suffer humiliation and were warned that God will re-punish them whenever they transgress and behave with arrogance. This warning remains true as long as human life continues.

Doubting Resurrection

Once more the *sūrah* takes up the unbelievers' doubts and denial of resurrection and accountability. Here, too, resurrection is linked to the fact that the structure of the universe is raised on a foundation of truth and seriousness that requires accountability and requital after resurrection:

> *Now these people assert: 'We shall die but one death, and we shall not be raised to life again. Bring back our forefathers, if what you claim be true.' Are they better than the people of Tubba' and those before them, whom We destroyed because they were lost in sin? We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them in mere idle play. We created them all for nothing other than a true purpose, but most of them do not understand. The Day of Decision is the time appointed for all of them. It is a day*

> *when no friend shall be of the least avail to his friend, and when none shall receive support except those upon whom God will have bestowed His grace and mercy. He alone is the Almighty, the Ever-Merciful.* (Verses 34–42)

The Arab idolaters used to say that people die once only and that is the end; no resurrection and no further life. They called this the first death, meaning that it precedes what they were promised of a second life after resurrection. To them, the proof of this assertion was contained in the fact that none of their forefathers who died had ever returned; none had been resurrected. They demanded that their forefathers should be brought back to life before their eyes if resurrection were indeed true. They thus betrayed their ignorance of the purpose of resurrection. They did not understand that it is a further stage of human life, with a definite purpose and a clear goal, which is the administration of requital for what was done in the first stage. Thus, God's obedient servants reach their noble destination, which they have earned through acting well in their first lives, while hardened sinners arrive at the miserable and filthy end they deserve. This means that resurrection will come about after the entire first stage of life has ended, i.e. man's time on earth has concluded. It precludes that resurrection should be the result of a human wish expressed by an individual or a community, so that they can believe in it. Indeed, faith is not complete unless one believes in resurrection, which God's messengers have confirmed, and which is apparent to anyone who reflects on the nature of life and God's wisdom in creating it in this way. Such reflection is sufficient on its own to believe in the Day of Judgement.

Before the *sūrah* invites them to reflect on the design of the universe, it shakes their hearts strongly, reminding them of the fate suffered by the people of Tubbaʿ,[2] in South Arabia. This story must have been well known to the Arabs, as the *sūrah* makes only a brief reference to it, warning them against a similarly terrible fate: "*Are they better than the people of Tubbaʿ and those before them, whom We destroyed because*

2. Tubbaʿ was the title given to the kings of Ḥimyar, a major tribe that lived in southern Arabia. – Editor's note.

they were lost in sin?" (Verse 37) As this reminder makes them shudder, they are called upon to reflect on the perfect design of the heavens and earth, and how the universe is finely balanced and well planned, indicating that it is deliberately made in this way for a particular purpose: "*We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them in mere idle play. We created them all for nothing other than a true purpose, but most of them do not understand. The Day of Decision is the time appointed for all of them. It is a day when no friend shall be of the least avail to his friend, and when none shall receive support except those upon whom God will have bestowed His grace and mercy. He alone is the Almighty, the Ever-Merciful.*" (Verses 38–42) There is a fine and delicate relation between the creation of the heavens, the earth and all that is in between them on the one hand and the question of resurrection and accountability on the other. Human nature can easily understand this when attention is drawn to it in the way described here.

Such reflection should take into account the creation of the universe, what it points to of elaborate planning, wise purpose, perfect balance and harmony, the creation of everything in accurate measure and quantity placing it thus in harmony with everything around it. Such reflection undoubtedly leads to the conclusion that everything is created on purpose. No coincidence or carelessness is allowed in any aspect, major or trivial, of the design of the huge celestial bodies or the small, fine creatures living on them. Thus, we realize that the universe is created for a purpose, which means that nothing of it is the result of idle play; and that it is based on the truth, which means that no falsehood is allowed to infiltrate it. We further realize that it must have an end, which does not occur at the point of death after a short journey on earth. Logically speaking, a second life, when reward and punishment are administered, is inevitable, so that good and evil come to their natural ends. Man has been so created as to be susceptible to both tendencies of good and evil. It is through his will and effort that he chooses one or the other, making himself liable to ultimately receive its reward or punishment, as the case may be.

That man is so created, with both tendencies, and that God's action cannot be mere idle play, means that man will have a specific fate

which he meets after his journey on earth is over. This is the essence of the hereafter. Hence, it is mentioned after attentions have been drawn to the wise purpose that lies beyond the creation of the universe: "*The Day of Decision is the time appointed for all of them. It is a day when no friend shall be of the least avail to his friend, and when none shall receive support except those upon whom God will have bestowed His grace and mercy. He alone is the Almighty, the Ever-Merciful.*" (Verses 40–42)

This statement comes naturally at this point, closely related as it is to what went before it. It is absolute wisdom that requires that creatures should have a day when judgement is made between those who follow true guidance and those who go astray; when goodness is rewarded and evil humiliated; when people have no support, bond or relation. They will return to their Creator as individuals, just like He created them, to be requited for what they did in life. No one will support them or offer a gesture of mercy, except for those on whom God bestows His grace. It is from God's hand that they came out to work in life, and to His hand they will return to receive what their actions deserve. In between, they have a chance to act, just as they are being tested.

Two Different Fates

The final scene in the *sūrah* depicts the two different ends of the believers and the unbelievers. Again, the scene and its images are violent, in keeping with the *sūrah*'s general ambiance:

> *The fruit of the Zaqqūm tree will be the food of the sinful; like molten lead will it boil in the belly, like the boiling of scalding water. 'Take him, and drag him into the midst of the blazing fire; then pour over his head the suffering of scalding water! Taste this, you powerful and honourable man! This is the very thing you surely doubted.'*
>
> *The God-fearing will certainly be in a safe position, amid gardens and fountains, wearing garments of silk and brocade, facing one another. Thus shall it be. And We shall pair them with pure companions with most beautiful eyes. There they can call for every*

kind of fruit, enjoying peace and security. They shall not taste death there, having had their one death. He will have preserved them from suffering through the blazing fire, an act of your Lord's favour. That is the supreme triumph. (Verses 43–57)

The scene begins with an image of the Zaqqūm tree, which is stated to provide the food of sinners. It is a powerful image that strikes fear and panic in the audience's hearts. The closest thing we know to this food is the lees, the sediment that remains when oil has been long boiled. This lees continues to boil in their bellies like molten lead. The sinful person who behaved towards his Lord and His trusted messenger with arrogance will be standing there. An order is issued to the guards of hell to take him away in a brutal manner that suits his 'honourable' position: "*Take him, and drag him into the midst of the blazing fire; then pour over his head the suffering of scalding water.*" (Verses 47–48) Drag him away so as to make him feel his humiliation, for there is no honour for such sinners! When he gets there, pour scalding water over his head so as to burn his skin. Then, added to all this punishment is a strong rebuke: "*Taste this, you powerful and honourable man!*" (Verse 49) This is indeed the fate best suited to the one who boasted of his power and honour. Now he has none of this, because his boasting was an affront to God and His messengers. "*This is the very thing you surely doubted.*" (Verse 50) When you were warned against this fate, you received the warning with mockery, doubting that it would ever happen.

Our eyes stretch to the other side to see the God-fearing who took the warning seriously and feared what may happen on this day of decision. We see them '*in a safe position*', where there is nothing to fear and no harsh treatment. They revel in their splendour '*amid gardens and fountains*'. Their garments are made of silk and brocade. They take their positions facing one another talking about whatever is of concern to them. In addition, they are given pure companions with beautiful eyes to make their bliss perfect. There, in heaven, they are the 'owners' of the place. They can ask for whatever they want and it will be given: "*There they can call for every kind of fruit, enjoying peace and security.*" (Verse 55) They expect no end to this happiness, as death

does not occur here. They have already died once and they will not be made to taste death again. This contrasts with what the unbelievers used to say in this present world: "*We shall die but one death, and we shall not be raised to life again.*" (Verse 35) In the unbelievers' case, the one death is followed by suffering in hell. The believers, who are in heaven, "*shall not taste death there, having had their one death. He will have preserved them from suffering through the blazing fire.*" (Verse 56) This is yet another aspect of God's favour which He bestows on believers. No one is saved from suffering on the Day of Judgement unless the Lord grants this favour. It is all through "*an act of your Lord's favour. That is the supreme triumph.*" (Verse 57)

The *sūrah* concludes with a reminder of the great blessing God has bestowed on us by sending His message to warn us against the consequences of disbelief: "*We have made this Qur'ān easy to understand, in your own language, so that they may take heed. Wait, then; they too are waiting.*" (Verses 58–59)

It is a fitting conclusion that sums up the message of the *sūrah*, reflects its ambiance, and fits with its beginning and line of discussion. It started with a reference to the book God revealed as a reminder for people so that they may take heed. It warned against what may happen on the Day of Judgement, with God saying: "*On that Day We shall deliver a mighty onslaught; We will indeed exact retribution.*" (Verse 16) The two short verses at the end remind them of the favour God granted them by giving them the Qur'ān in the Arabic tongue, which they understand. They are finally given an implicit but nonetheless fearful warning: "*Wait, then; they too are waiting.*" (Verse 59)

SŪRAH 45

Al-Jāthiyah

(Kneeling Down)

Prologue

This *sūrah*, revealed in Makkah, describes some aspects of the reception Islam received from the idolaters. It reports their facile answers to its arguments and signs, states their stubborn rejection of the truth and shows how they unashamedly pursued desire. The Qur'ān also portrays their minds as sealed to Divine guidance, straying in whatever direction their fancies led them. Yet the Qur'ān continued to confront them with God's signs, reminded them of God's punishment and described His reward and His laws that operate in the universe.

As the *sūrah* describes those who opposed the message in Makkah, we see a group of people who insisted on going astray, who stubbornly rejected the truth and who were rude in their description of God and His revelations. Such people are described in the *sūrah* in the terms they deserve. They are also warned against God's grievous and humiliating punishment: "*Woe betide every lying, sinful person who hears God's revelations being recited to him, and yet persists in his haughty disdain, as though he had not heard them. So, give him the news of painful suffering. When he learns something of Our revelations, he ridicules it. For such people there is humiliating suffering in store. Hell lurks behind them; and all that they may have gained shall be of no avail whatsoever*

to them, nor shall any of those which they took for their protectors beside God. Grievous suffering awaits them." (Verses 7–10)

We also see a group of people, perhaps belonging to those who received earlier revelations but who were given to ill thoughts and misjudgement. They paid little attention to the truth of faith and saw little difference between those who did evil and those who did good works. The *sūrah* makes it abundantly clear to them that there is a huge difference between these two types on God's scales. It describes them as ill-judging and makes it clear that God judges all on the basis of absolute justice, which has been ingrained within the core of the universe since the beginning of creation: "*Do those who indulge in sinful deeds think that We shall place them, both in their life and their death, on an equal footing with those who believe and do righteous deeds? Flawed is their judgement. God has created the heavens and the earth in accordance with the truth, so that every soul shall be recompensed according to its deeds. None shall be wronged.*" (Verses 21–22)

We also see the person who has no criterion other than his own desire for judging anything. For this type, desire is the deity he worships and obeys. The *sūrah* wonders at such people and publicizes the fact that they are blind to the truth: "*Consider the one who takes his own desires as his deity, and whom God has [therefore] let go astray despite his knowledge [of the truth], sealing his ears and heart and placing a cover on his eyes: who can guide such a person after God [has abandoned him]? Will you not, then, take heed?*" (Verse 23) Such people deny the life to come altogether, express grave doubts about the issue of resurrection and accountability and they stubbornly reject the truth asking for proofs that cannot be given in this life. The Qur'ān directs such people to consider the signs and proofs already in place. They, however, remain oblivious to these: "*They say: 'There is nothing beyond our life in this world. We die, we live, nothing but time destroys us.' Of this they have no knowledge whatsoever. They merely guess. Whenever Our revelations are recited to them in all their clarity, their only argument is to say: 'Bring back our forefathers, if what you claim be true.' Say: 'It is God who gives you life, then causes you to die; and then He will gather you all on Resurrection Day of which there is no doubt, though most people do not understand.'*" (Verses 24–26)

It is possible to read all these descriptions as pointing to a single type of people. It is equally possible that they are different groups, all of which were opposed to the Islamic message during its period in Makkah. They would, thus, include some people to whom revelations were given in former times, but these would have been very small in number in Makkah at that time. Yet this reference to people of earlier revelations need not point to a particular group in Makkah; it may just be a pointer to a type of people that others should be made aware of.

Be that as it may, the Qur'ān confronts these people, highlighting as it does their qualities and behavioural patterns. It describes for them God's signs all over the universe and within themselves, warning them that they will have to face the reckoning on the Day of Judgement. It also cites what happened to communities before them when they abandoned Divine faith.

In the first instance, God's signs are put before them in a profound, effective and simple way: "*Surely, in the heavens and the earth there are signs for those who believe. And in your own creation, and in the animals God scatters on earth there are signs for people of sure faith. And in the alternation of night and day, and in the means of subsistence God sends down from the skies, reviving with it the earth after it had been lifeless, and in the shifting of the winds there are signs for those who use their reason. Such are God's signs that We recount to you, setting forth the truth. In what discourse will they then believe, if they deny God and His revelations?*" (Verses 3–6)

The *sūrah* then refers to other signs, showing them as blessings and favours granted by God, but the rejecters are oblivious to the message these impart: "*It is God who has subjected the sea for you, so that ships sail through it by His command, and that you may seek of His bounty, and that you give thanks. And He has subjected to you, as a gift from Himself, all that is in the heavens and on earth. In this there are signs for people who think.*" (Verses 12–13)

The *sūrah* also shows the unbelievers what they will be like on the Day of Resurrection, which is something they deny altogether: "*When the Last Hour strikes, those who follow falsehood will on that Day lose all. You will see every community on its knees. Every community will be*

summoned to its record: 'Today you shall be requited for all that you did. This Our record speaks of you in all truth; for We have been recording everything you do.' Those who believed and did righteous deeds will be admitted by their Lord into His grace. That will be the manifest triumph. And as for the unbelievers, [they will be asked]: 'When My revelations were recited to you, did you not glory in your arrogance and persist in your wicked ways? For when it was said, "God's promise will certainly come true, and there can be no doubt about the Last Hour," you would answer, "We know nothing of the Last Hour. We think it is all conjecture, and we are by no means convinced."' The evil of their deeds will become clear to them, and they will be overwhelmed by the very thing they used to deride. It will be said to them: 'Today We shall be oblivious of you as you were oblivious of the coming of this your Day! The fire will be your abode, and you will have no one to help you. Thus it is, because you received God's revelations with ridicule and allowed the life of this world to beguile you.' Therefore, they will not be brought out of the Fire on that Day, nor will they be given a chance to make amends." (Verses 27–35)

The *sūrah* leaves absolutely no doubt about the fairness of the requital or each person's individual responsibility. This fundamental principle is shown to be central in the way the universe came into existence and in the way it is maintained: "*Whoever does what is right benefits himself; and whoever does evil causes himself harm. In the end to your Lord you will all return.*" (Verse 15) This is further clarified as the *sūrah* responds to those who do evil yet consider that they will be on an equal footing with those who believe in God and do good deeds: "*God has created the heavens and the earth in accordance with the truth, so that every soul shall be recompensed according to its deeds. None shall be wronged.*" (Verse 22)

In the way it addresses its subject matter, the *sūrah* is one single whole, but we have divided it into two parts for easier study. It begins with the two separate letters, *Ḥā, Mīm*, adding a reference to the Qur'ān: "*This Book is bestowed from on high by God, the Almighty, the Wise.*" (Verse 2) It concludes by addressing all praise to God, the absolute Lord of all the universe. This glorification of Him contrasts with the attitude of those who remain oblivious to His signs and

who ridicule His revelations: "*All praise is due to God, the Lord of the heavens, the Lord of the earth and the Lord of all the worlds. His alone is all supremacy in the heavens and the earth. He alone is the Almighty, the Wise.*" (Verses 36–37)

The *sūrah* is characterized by its easy flow and a soft beat that contrasts with the strong rhythm of the preceding *sūrah*, Smoke. God, the Creator of people's hearts and the One who has bestowed this Qur'ān from on high, sometimes addresses people in a strong and hard way, at other times with gentle touches, and then again sometimes with a soft and quiet beat. He takes into account their different conditions, circumstances, attitudes and responses. His knowledge is absolute and His wisdom infinite.

I

A Clear Way of Religion

Al-Jāthiyah (Kneeling Down)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

Ḥā. Mīm. (1)

This Book is bestowed from on high by God, the Almighty, the Wise. (2)

Surely, in the heavens and the earth there are signs for those who believe. (3)

And in your own creation, and in the animals God scatters on earth there are signs for people of sure faith. (4)

And in the alternation of night and day, and in the means of subsistence God sends down from the skies, reviving with it the earth after it had been lifeless, and in the shifting of the winds there are signs for those who use their reason. (5)

وَٱخْتِلَٰفِ ٱلَّيْلِ وَٱلنَّهَارِ وَمَآ أَنزَلَ ٱللَّهُ مِنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ مِن رِّزْقٍ فَأَحْيَا بِهِ ٱلْأَرْضَ بَعْدَ مَوْتِهَا وَتَصْرِيفِ ٱلرِّيَٰحِ ءَايَٰتٌ لِّقَوْمٍ يَعْقِلُونَ ٥

Such are God's signs that We recount to you, setting forth the truth. In what discourse will they then believe, if they deny God and His revelations? (6)

تِلْكَ ءَايَٰتُ ٱللَّهِ نَتْلُوهَا عَلَيْكَ بِٱلْحَقِّ فَبِأَىِّ حَدِيثٍۭ بَعْدَ ٱللَّهِ وَءَايَٰتِهِۦ يُؤْمِنُونَ ٦

Woe betide every lying, sinful person (7)

وَيْلٌ لِّكُلِّ أَفَّاكٍ أَثِيمٍ ٧

who hears God's revelations being recited to him, and yet persists in his haughty disdain, as though he had not heard them. So, give him the news of painful suffering. (8)

يَسْمَعُ ءَايَٰتِ ٱللَّهِ تُتْلَىٰ عَلَيْهِ ثُمَّ يُصِرُّ مُسْتَكْبِرًا كَأَن لَّمْ يَسْمَعْهَا فَبَشِّرْهُ بِعَذَابٍ أَلِيمٍ ٨

When he learns something of Our revelations, he ridicules it. For such people there is humiliating suffering in store. (9)

وَإِذَا عَلِمَ مِنْ ءَايَٰتِنَا شَيْـًٔا ٱتَّخَذَهَا هُزُوًا أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ مُّهِينٌ ٩

Hell lurks behind them; and all that they may have gained shall be of no avail whatsoever to them, nor shall any of those which they took for their protectors beside God. Grievous suffering awaits them. (10)

مِّن وَرَآئِهِمْ جَهَنَّمُ وَلَا يُغْنِي عَنْهُم
مَّا كَسَبُوا۟ شَيْـًٔا وَلَا مَا ٱتَّخَذُوا۟ مِن
دُونِ ٱللَّهِ أَوْلِيَآءَ وَلَهُمْ عَذَابٌ
عَظِيمٌ ١٠

This is true guidance; those who reject their Lord's revelations shall suffer abominable punishment. (11)

هَٰذَا هُدًى وَٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ بِـَٔايَٰتِ رَبِّهِمْ
لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ مِّن رِّجْزٍ أَلِيمٌ ١١

It is God who has subjected the sea for you, so that ships sail through it by His command, and that you may seek of His bounty, and that you give thanks. (12)

ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِى سَخَّرَ لَكُمُ ٱلْبَحْرَ لِتَجْرِىَ ٱلْفُلْكُ
فِيهِ بِأَمْرِهِۦ وَلِتَبْتَغُوا۟ مِن فَضْلِهِۦ وَلَعَلَّكُمْ
تَشْكُرُونَ ١٢

And He has subjected to you, as a gift from Himself, all that is in the heavens and on earth. In this there are signs for people who think. (13)

وَسَخَّرَ لَكُم مَّا فِى ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَمَا فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ
جَمِيعًا مِّنْهُ إِنَّ فِى ذَٰلِكَ لَءَايَٰتٍ لِّقَوْمٍ
يَتَفَكَّرُونَ ١٣

Tell the believers that they should forgive those who do not look forward to the Days of God. It is for Him alone to requite people for whatever they may have earned. (14)

قُل لِّلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ يَغْفِرُوا۟ لِلَّذِينَ
لَا يَرْجُونَ أَيَّامَ ٱللَّهِ لِيَجْزِىَ قَوْمًۢا
بِمَا كَانُوا۟ يَكْسِبُونَ ١٤

Whoever does what is right benefits himself; and whoever does evil causes himself harm. In the end to your Lord you will all return. (15)

مَنْ عَمِلَ صَٰلِحًا فَلِنَفْسِهِۦ ۖ وَمَنْ أَسَآءَ فَعَلَيْهَا ۖ ثُمَّ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكُمْ تُرْجَعُونَ ﴿١٥﴾

To the Children of Israel We gave revelations, wisdom and prophethood; and We provided them with wholesome things and favoured them above all other nations. (16)

وَلَقَدْ ءَاتَيْنَا بَنِىٓ إِسْرَٰٓءِيلَ ٱلْكِتَٰبَ وَٱلْحُكْمَ وَٱلنُّبُوَّةَ وَرَزَقْنَٰهُم مِّنَ ٱلطَّيِّبَٰتِ وَفَضَّلْنَٰهُمْ عَلَى ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿١٦﴾

We granted them clear indications in matters of faith. It was only after knowledge had been granted them that they began to differ maliciously among themselves. Your Lord will certainly judge between them on Resurrection Day regarding all that on which they differed. (17)

وَءَاتَيْنَٰهُم بَيِّنَٰتٍ مِّنَ ٱلْأَمْرِ ۖ فَمَا ٱخْتَلَفُوٓا۟ إِلَّا مِنۢ بَعْدِ مَا جَآءَهُمُ ٱلْعِلْمُ بَغْيًۢا بَيْنَهُمْ ۚ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ يَقْضِى بَيْنَهُمْ يَوْمَ ٱلْقِيَٰمَةِ فِيمَا كَانُوا۟ فِيهِ يَخْتَلِفُونَ ﴿١٧﴾

And now We have set you on a clear way of religion; so follow it, and do not follow the desires of those who do not know [the truth]. (18)

ثُمَّ جَعَلْنَٰكَ عَلَىٰ شَرِيعَةٍ مِّنَ ٱلْأَمْرِ فَٱتَّبِعْهَا وَلَا تَتَّبِعْ أَهْوَآءَ ٱلَّذِينَ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿١٨﴾

They will be of no help to you against God. The wrongdoers have only one another to protect them, whereas God is the Protector of all who are God-fearing. (19)

إِنَّهُمْ لَن يُغْنُوا۟ عَنكَ مِنَ ٱللَّهِ شَيْـًٔا ۚ وَإِنَّ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ بَعْضُهُمْ أَوْلِيَآءُ بَعْضٍ ۖ وَٱللَّهُ وَلِىُّ ٱلْمُتَّقِينَ ﴿١٩﴾

هَٰذَا بَصَٰٓئِرُ لِلنَّاسِ وَهُدًى وَرَحْمَةٌ لِّقَوْمٍ يُوقِنُونَ ٢٠

This [revelation] is a means of insight for mankind, and a source of guidance and grace for people of sure faith. (20)

أَمْ حَسِبَ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱجْتَرَحُوا۟ ٱلسَّيِّـَٔاتِ أَن نَّجْعَلَهُمْ كَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَعَمِلُوا۟ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ سَوَآءً مَّحْيَاهُمْ وَمَمَاتُهُمْ ۚ سَآءَ مَا يَحْكُمُونَ ٢١

Do those who indulge in sinful deeds think that We shall place them, both in their life and their death, on an equal footing with those who believe and do righteous deeds? Flawed is their judgement. (21)

وَخَلَقَ ٱللَّهُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضَ بِٱلْحَقِّ وَلِتُجْزَىٰ كُلُّ نَفْسٍۭ بِمَا كَسَبَتْ وَهُمْ لَا يُظْلَمُونَ ٢٢

God has created the heavens and the earth in accordance with the truth, so that every soul shall be recompensed according to its deeds. None shall be wronged. (22)

أَفَرَءَيْتَ مَنِ ٱتَّخَذَ إِلَٰهَهُۥ هَوَىٰهُ وَأَضَلَّهُ ٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ عِلْمٍ وَخَتَمَ عَلَىٰ سَمْعِهِۦ وَقَلْبِهِۦ وَجَعَلَ عَلَىٰ بَصَرِهِۦ غِشَٰوَةً فَمَن يَهْدِيهِ مِنۢ بَعْدِ ٱللَّهِ ۚ أَفَلَا تَذَكَّرُونَ ٢٣

Consider the one who takes his own desires as his deity, and whom God has [therefore] let go astray despite his knowledge [of the truth], sealing his ears and heart and placing a cover on his eyes: who can guide such a person after God [has abandoned him]? Will you not, then, take heed? (23)

Signs Everywhere

> Ḥā. Mīm. *This book is bestowed from on high by God, the Almighty, the Wise. Surely, in the heavens and the earth there are signs for those who believe. And in your own creation, and in the animals God scatters on earth there are signs for people of sure faith. And in the alternation of night and day, and in the means of subsistence God sends down from the skies, reviving with it the earth after it had been lifeless, and in the shifting of the winds there are signs for those who use their reason.* (Verses 1–5)

The *sūrah* mentions the revelation of this book, the Qur'ān, by God, the Almighty, the Wise after having introduced the two separate Arabic letters *Ḥā, Mīm,* to point to this book's source. In speaking about the separate letters introduced at the beginning of a number of *sūrahs,* we have mentioned elsewhere that they highlight the fact that the Qur'ān is composed of the letters forming the Arab's own language, yet they cannot produce even a very small portion like it. This, then, constitutes permanent evidence that the Qur'ān is bestowed from on high by God, the Almighty who can do whatever He wishes, the Wise who creates everything according to a certain measure and to serve a particular purpose. This is an apt comment that fits the ambience of the *sūrah* and its discussion of different types of people.

Before speaking about the unbelievers and their attitude towards the Qur'ān, the *sūrah* refers to signs pointing to the Creator that are available everywhere in the world around them. Alone, these signs should have been enough to direct them to believe in God. Now, the *sūrah* turns their minds to such signs so that they may open their hearts to them and realize that it is God who has bestowed this book from on high and that it is He who has created this great universe: "*Surely, in the heavens and the earth there are signs for those who believe.*" (Verse 3) The signs scattered everywhere in the heavens and the earth are not limited to any area or situation. Wherever we look around us we find signs. Is there anything in this wonderful universe that is not a sign pointing to its great Maker?

Look at the skies and the great celestial bodies that are scattered like small particles in space; it is such an awesome expanse, yet so pleasant to the eye. Consider these celestial bodies as they move in their respective orbits with unfailing accuracy and harmony. We are never tired of contemplating this perfect harmony which is conspicuous everywhere around us. Then look at the earth: how big it is in comparison to the humans who dwell on it, yet it is no more than a tiny particle compared to the huge stars or to the expanse in which it floats. It would have been lost in that expanse, had it not been for the hand of God placing it in its appointed position within the overall universal system. Nothing is lost sight of. Consider also how God gave this earth the necessary conditions that allow the emergence of life on it. This has required that many fine elements have been brought together in absolute accuracy of measure and quality. Should any of these qualities be in the wrong measure or be inaccurate in their function, life on earth would not have been possible nor would it have lasted.[1]

Everything on earth and every living thing, indeed every part of every living thing, large or small, is a sign. This applies to fine, little things in the same way as it applies to the large and huge: a small leaf in a great high tree or a frail plant is a sign when we contemplate its shape, size, colour and feel. A hair on the body of man or animal and a bird's feather are equally signs whether in terms of quality, length, material or function. Wherever man stretches his eyes to look at the skies or the earth, he will find a great multitude of signs that stand clear before him. Yet, who looks at these signs and understands their message? To whom are they addressed? In short, these are "*signs for those who believe.*" (Verse 3)

It is faith that opens people's hearts to receive the messages that emanate from the numerous great signs disseminated throughout the heavens and the earth. When faith touches hearts, they soften and become far more receptive. The message everything around us gives is to indicate the distinctive nature of whatever God's hand has made of objects, whether these be animate or inanimate. Indeed, everything

1. For further discussion of this point, please refer to the commentary on Verse 2 of *Sūrah* 25, in Vol. XII, pp. 379–383.

God has created is miraculous in nature. No one else can create anything similar to it.

The *sūrah* then points out that God's signs can also be seen within people themselves. They feel these close at hand: "*And in your own creation, and in the animals God scatters on earth there are signs for people of sure faith.*" (Verse 4) Man's wonderful constitution, unique qualities, varied and fine functions are all miraculous indeed, but we tend to forget this because of long familiarity. Indeed the physical make-up of any human organ fills us with wonder. In its most simple and primitive form, in the amoeba and even smaller forms, life is a miracle. If this is apparent in man's highly complex constitution how much more complex then is his psychological and emotional constitution?

Around man, countless creatures walk on earth: different kinds with a great variety of shape, size and form. Only God knows them all. The smallest is the same as the largest: they are all miraculous in their creation and in the way they fit with the overall pattern of life. No species increases beyond certain limits to the extinction of other species. Only the mighty hand of God controls them all, increasing or decreasing them according to a perfect measure, giving them the qualities and functions that ensure proper balance.

Eagles are birds of prey that enjoy longevity, but who lay only a small number of eggs and so procreate on a small scale, as compared with swallows and other small birds. What would the world of birds be like had eagles procreated at the same rate as swallows and swifts? Needless to say, all other types of birds would have vanished. The same applies to lions who are ferocious hunters. What would animal life be like, had they procreated at the same rates as sheep and deer? No other animal species would have survived in any jungle or forest. Again, the hand of God controls the number of lions to ensure continuity, and increases the numbers of sheep and deer for an easily recognized purpose. A fly lays hundreds of thousands of eggs during its life cycle, yet flies live for only around two weeks. What would happen if flies were left to live for months or years?

Thus we see that in the very act of creation and its management, the qualities of different creatures of all kinds and types, there are endless

signs that deliver the same message, but only to those who make the effort to see and contemplate these signs. These are "*signs for people of sure faith.*" Certainty of faith is the condition that makes hearts receptive and interacting. It gives them reassurance so that they can look at the facts the universe presents with ease, confidence and calm. This enables our minds to draw great conclusions from simple facts.

The *sūrah* then highlights a number of natural phenomena and their effects on human life and on the lives of other creatures: "*And in the alternation of night and day, and in the means of subsistence God sends down from the skies, reviving with it the earth after it had been lifeless, and in the shifting of the winds there are signs for those who use their reason.*" (Verse 5) The alternation of day and night is a phenomenon that has lost its significance in the minds of most people because of its regular frequency. Yet, what wonder would fill the heart of anyone who sees the approach of night or the creeping of the day for the first time? An alert mind and an open heart will always see this great wonder and marvel at it as they see in it God's hand that controls the universe.

As human knowledge of some natural phenomena increased, man came to know that the night and day result from the earth revolving in its position opposite the sun once every 24 hours. Yet the wonder is in no way diminished. Indeed, similarly wonderful is the fact that the earth revolves with such regular speed while floating in space, with nothing to hold it in place other than God's hand that has set the laws of nature in place, thus allowing life to emerge on this planet. Human knowledge broadens and people begin to recognize the great importance of the alternation of night and day for life on our planet. They understand that dividing time into night and day is essential for the emergence of life and its continuity. Without such alternation, everything on earth would be different, particularly human life. Thus the more we know, the better we feel the remarkable wonder that is this great phenomenon.

"*And in the means of subsistence God sends down from the skies, reviving with it the earth after it had been lifeless.*" (Verse 5) The '*means of subsistence*' may refer to rain pouring down, as people understood in the past. Yet the term may refer to other things that

come from the skies and have similarly important roles to play in sustaining life on earth. The rays that come from the skies provide an example. These rays are actually essential for rain, because it is the heat of the sun that causes sea water to evaporate. It then gathers in clouds that produce the rain in a process of condensation. Rain water then forms reservoirs that allows rivers to flow and springs to gush forth. Thus, after being lifeless, the earth is revived through water, heat and light.

"*And in the shifting of the winds.*" The winds blow east or west, north or south, straight or at an angle, hot and cold, but always in accordance with the accurate, synchronized system that operates in the universe, where everything is meticulously calculated leaving nothing to coincidence. The blowing of the wind has a definite relation to the movement of the earth, the alternation of day and night as also to the means of subsistence sent down from the skies. They all cooperate to fulfil God's will and how it operates in the universe. All these are signs we see in the universe, but who understands their message? It is understood only by "*those who use their reason.*" (Verse 5) Man's mind, thus, has a role, one that it should fulfil.

Those Deaf to the Qur'ān

The Qur'ān, revealed by God, highlights these universal signs in a way that inspires believers who have certainty of faith and who use their reason. In this way, it touches hearts and minds and addresses people's natures. The profound link between human nature and the universe means that it only requires some inspiring words, such as the verses of the Qur'ān, for senses to be alerted and made responsive. Anyone who does not believe as a result of contemplating these signs is totally unlikely to believe in some other way; and the one who is not fully alerted by the inspiring verses of the Qur'ān will not be alerted by loud outcries from any other source: "*Such are God's signs that We recount to you, setting forth the truth. In what discourse will they then believe, if they deny God and His revelations?*" (Verse 6)

No words will be as effective as the Qur'ān, God's word. Nor will any creation be equal to God's creation in the universe. Likewise, no

truth will be as clear and confirmed as the truth of God: "*In what discourse will they then believe, if they deny God and His revelations?*" (Verse 6)

The only requital fit to be given to an unbeliever is severe punishment:

> *Woe betide every lying, sinful person who hears God's revelations being recited to him, and yet persists in his haughty disdain, as though he had not heard them. So, give him the news of painful suffering. When he learns something of Our revelations, he ridicules it. For such people there is humiliating suffering in store. Hell lurks behind them; and all that they may have gained shall be of no avail whatsoever to them, nor shall any of those which they took for their protectors beside God. Grievous suffering awaits them.* (Verses 7–10)

These verses describe, in part, the unbelievers' reception of the Islamic message in Makkah, their stubborn refusal to listen to the clear word of truth and their insistence on falsehood. They take a hostile attitude to the truth, as if it has never even been presented to them. These verses also mention the unbelievers' rudeness and impudence as they speak of God and His word. The Qur'ān severely rebukes them for this, putting before them the grievous and humiliating suffering they are certain to endure.

"*Woe betide every lying, sinful person.*" (Verse 7) This verse threatens every habitual liar who frequently indulges in sin. The threat is issued by God Almighty who is able to bring about the total destruction of any community, and whose promises and warnings always come true. This makes the warning all the more serious and frightening.

The mark of such a lying, sinful person is that he persistently holds on to what is false, looks with disdain on the truth, feels too proud to respond to God's revelations and behaves with insolence towards God. He thus: "*hears God's revelations being recited to him, and yet persists in his haughty disdain, as though he had not heard them.*" (Verse 8) Although this hateful type of person could be found among the idolaters in Makkah, the same type is seen in every *jāhiliyyah* society, immersed in ignorance, whether in the past, present or future. Many

are those all over the world, including some who are described as Muslims, who behave with disdain when they hear God's revelations being recited and who persist in their erring ways as though they have never heard such revelations. They do so because what God has revealed is contrary to their desire and will not approve the evil and false practices in which they indulge.

"*So, give him the news of painful suffering.*" (Verse 8) This statement describes the punishment such a person will receive, but the Arabic text uses the word *bashshir* for 'giving news', even though the word is only used for giving good news. As used in this verse to bring news of painful suffering, it thus carries connotations of ridicule. If this person does not listen to the warning, let him receive the news of his suffering in a voice that signals good news. What mockery!

"*When he learns something of Our revelations, he ridicules it,*" after learning their source. This is a far more serious and grave response. Yet it describes an oft found situation in every community that lives in a state of ignorance, or *jāhiliyyah*. How many are those, including some described as Muslims, who ridicule God's revelations, mocking them and those who believe in them. "*For such people there is humiliating suffering in store.*" (Verse 9) Humiliation is the fitting requital for everyone who ridicules God's revelations.

This suffering is ready and close at hand. It may not be time for it yet, but it is nevertheless present: "*Hell lurks behind them*". (Verse 10) The phrase, '*behind them,*' has connotations that are specifically intended. Since the suffering is 'behind' them, they do not see it and remain oblivious to it. Therefore, they do not try to avoid it. Yet it will surely engulf them. "*All that they may have gained shall be of no avail whatsoever to them, nor shall any of those which they took for their protectors beside God.*" (Verse 10) Nothing that they might have done or gained is of any use to them. Even if some of their deeds are good, they cannot benefit from them because they have been scattered by the wind like dust. Their deeds were not founded on a solid basis of faith. Likewise, their possessions will be of no use to them. Nor can their deities, friends, supporters or soldiers offer them help or protection. Nor can they intercede on their behalf. "*Grievous suffering awaits them.*" (Verse 10) Their punishment is not only humiliating, as

fits their offence for mocking God's revelations, it is also grievous to suit the magnitude of that offence.

This section concludes with a word that describes, in general terms, the true nature of God's revelations and the punishment to be meted out to those who disbelieve them: "*This is true guidance; those who reject their Lord's revelations shall suffer abominable punishment.*" (Verse 11) It is a fact that this Qur'ān is true and pure guidance that admits no error whatsoever. Therefore, anyone who denies its truth deserves such grievous suffering. The nature of the pain is described here as abominable, which serves to emphasize its description in the previous verses.

Will They Reflect?

Once again the *sūrah* reminds them of the great favours and blessings God has given them in this world, so that their hearts may soften and reflect:

> *It is God who has subjected the sea for you, so that ships sail through it by His command, and that you may seek of His bounty, and that you give thanks. And He has subjected to you, as a gift from Himself, all that is in the heavens and on earth. In this there are signs for people who think.* (Verses 12–13)

Man, an insignificant creature in this great universe, receives a large share of God's care, which allows him to make use of greater creatures in the universe, benefiting by them in a variety of ways when he understands a part of the secret, Divine law that controls all. Had man remained ignorant of this part of God's law, he could not, weak as he is, have benefited by such great forces. He would not even be able to live with them, considering his small stature and strength compared with theirs.

The sea is one such huge force which God has subjected to man by revealing to him a portion of its secret make-up and qualities. Thus, man has been able to make ships sail through the huge oceans without fear of its strong waves: "*so that ships sail through it by His command.*" (Verse 12) It is God who has given the sea and the material from which ships are made their qualities and made atmospheric pressure, the speed

of winds, earth's gravity and other universal features in the way they are. Thus, they combine to allow ships to sail through the sea. God further guided man to understand all this and make use of it for his own benefit, whether it be by fishing, trade, gaining knowledge, or sports and pleasure: "*And that you may seek of His bounty.*" It behoves man, then, to turn to God in gratitude for all these favours: "*and that you give thanks.*" (Verse 12) The Qur'ān directs man to attend to this duty and to understand the close relationship between him and the universe. Everything has been originated by God and everything will ultimately return to Him.

Having specified the sea, the *sūrah* makes a general reference to God's favours. He has made all the forces, potentials and blessings in the universe that have a bearing on man's task on earth subservient to him: "*And He has subjected to you, as a gift from Himself, all that is in the heavens and on earth.*" (Verse 13) Everything in the universe is created by God. He controls it and determines its operation. Man, a small creature in the universe, is given the ability to understand a part of the laws of nature that operate, by God's will, in this universe. This enables him to make use of powers and forces that are immeasurably greater than his own. Without God's grace, he would not have been able to do so. In all this, there are signs to reflect upon: "*In this there are signs for people who think.*" (Verse 13)

Forgiveness of Offenders

Now the *sūrah* calls on believers to show magnanimity and forbearance to those who are weak because their hearts do not open to the great source of power. They are urged to show kindness to those who are blind to the great truths, and as a result, do not look forward to God's great days when some aspects of His majesty are clearly shown:

> *Tell the believers that they should forgive those who do not look forward to the Days of God. It is for Him alone to requite people for whatever they may have earned. Whoever does what is right benefits himself; and whoever does evil causes himself harm. In the end to your Lord you will all return.* (Verses 14–15)

This directive is issued to the believers, requiring them to be forbearing towards those who do not look forward to God's days. Theirs should be an attitude of forgiveness that combines generosity with power and dignity. The truth is that such people deserve pity and sympathy because they are deprived of the benefit of believing in God, which is a rich treasure of grace, strength, wealth, reassurance and kindness. It provides true protection in moments of stress and weakness. They are also deprived of true knowledge that understands the nature of universal laws and what they can bring of power and riches for man's benefit. Those who enjoy the wealth of grace and benefits that come with faith are the ones who should be forbearing. They should forgive the slips and errors of the ones who are deprived of them.

On the other hand, the believers should leave the matter to God and He will requite all as they deserve. He will then credit them with their forbearing attitude and reward them for it as a deed of goodness. Such forgiveness naturally applies to what does not spread corruption on earth and does not constitute a transgression of the bounds set by God: "*It is for Him alone to requite people for whatever they may have earned.*" (Verse 14) This is followed by an assertion about every person's individual responsibility and about fair judgement for all. It further confirms that all will return to God: "*Whoever does what is right benefits himself; and whoever does evil causes himself harm. In the end to your Lord you will all return.*" (Verse 15) When this is made clear, a believer is able to be forbearing and to overlook personal offences, but this forbearance is not out of weakness. Instead, he is the one who is strong and magnanimous. He holds the torch of guidance to enable the ones deprived of light to see. He comes forward with the cure for those who are ill. He will be rewarded according to his deeds, unharmed by those who do evil. All matters are ultimately judged by God, to whom all shall return.

The Leaders of Humanity

The *sūrah* then speaks of the leadership of humanity and how it has ultimately been assigned to believers in the Islamic message. It refers to the divisions that split the Children of Israel after God had given

them scriptures, wisdom and prophethood. The mantle of leadership has now been given to the messenger advocating God's final message. This was clearly stated when the Prophet was still in Makkah, suffering with his followers from persecution by the unbelievers. Yet this tells us something about the nature of the Islamic message, right from its very beginning, and the mission it is expected to fulfil:

> *To the Children of Israel We gave revelations, wisdom and prophethood; and We provided them with wholesome things and favoured them above all other nations. We granted them clear indications in matters of faith. It was only after knowledge had been granted them that they began to differ maliciously among themselves. Your Lord will certainly judge between them on Resurrection Day regarding all that on which they differed. And now We have set you on a clear way of religion; so follow it, and do not follow the desires of those who do not know [the truth]. They will be of no help to you against God. The wrongdoers have only one another to protect them, whereas God is the Protector of all who are God-fearing. This [revelation] is a means of insight for mankind, and a source of guidance and grace for people of sure faith.* (Verses 16–20)

Before the advent of Islam, the leadership of mankind was assigned to the Children of Israel. They were the community entrusted with the Divine faith God laid down for a certain period of time. Mankind needs a leadership enlightened with Divine guidance. When human leadership is based on earthly considerations alone, with no reference to Divine guidance, it is pulled in different directions whether by desire, ignorance or commonplace failings. God alone, the Creator of mankind, is the One who gives people a law that is free from the pressures of desire, ignorance or failing. He is the One who knows best what suits His creation.

"*To the Children of Israel We gave revelations, wisdom and prophethood.*" (Verse 16) They were given the Torah, containing God's law, and they had a state where they were required to implement this law. They were also given prophethood after Moses so as to ensure the

continued and right implementation of this Divine law. Prophets were sent to them in succession over a relatively long period of history. "*We provided them with wholesome things and favoured them above all other nations.*" (Verse 16) Their kingdom was in the holy land, which yielded rich harvests of all types, stretching from the Nile to the Euphrates.

"*We granted them clear indications in matters of faith.*" (Verse 17) What they were given of the Divine law was clear and decisive, free of ambiguity, confusion and contradiction. There was absolutely no reason for them to differ over this clear law. There was no obscurity over any question of their faith or its laws, and they were certainly aware of the right judgement on all matters of importance. Nevertheless, "*it was only after knowledge had been granted them that they began to differ maliciously among themselves.*" (Verse 17) Such disputes were motivated by mutual envy, malice and injustice, despite their knowing the truth. Therefore, their leadership of mankind was terminated, and their case is left to God, who will judge them on the Day of Resurrection: "*Your Lord will certainly judge between them on Resurrection Day regarding all that on which they differed.*" (Verse 17)

God then assigned a new leadership, imparted a new message to a different messenger, put His Divine law back on its right course and gave back to Divine faith its absolute clarity. This new leadership is thus guided by God's law, not by any human desire: "*And now We have set you on a clear way of religion; so follow it, and do not follow the desires of those who do not know [the truth].*" (Verse 18) Thus matters are defined in absolute clarity: it is either God's law or people's changing desires that are devoid of knowledge. There can be no third alternative and no middle way. No one abandons Divine law unless they choose to pursue human desires. Everything that differs with God's law is the expression of desire that pleases those who lack knowledge. God warns His messenger against following the desires of those who have no knowledge of the truth, as they will be of no avail to him. They only try to protect one another. Thus, they cannot harm him in any way as God will support and protect him: "*They will be of no help to you against God. The wrongdoers have only one another to protect them, whereas God is the Protector of all who are God-fearing.*" (Verse 19)

This verse and the one before it charts the way for the advocates of the Divine message, leaving no need for any comment or further detail: "*And now We have set you on a clear way of religion; so follow it, and do not follow the desires of those who do not know [the truth]. They will be of no help to you against God. The wrongdoers have only one another to protect them, whereas God is the Protector of all who are God-fearing.*" (Verses 18–19) There is only one law that fits this description; everything else is the result of desire and ignorance. Every advocate of the Divine faith must follow only that. Those who espouse desire cannot help a believer: they only help one another and will not abandon their course. Yet they are too weak to be able to cause a believer any harm, since God is the One who protects the God-fearing. How can humans who, in their ignorance and weakness, have only one another for support be compared to one who advocates God's law and is protected by Him?

Commenting on this decisive clarification, the *sūrah* mentions the certainty of faith and what the Qur'ān provides of insight, guidance and Divine grace: "*This [revelation] is a means of insight for mankind, and a source of guidance and grace for people of sure faith.*" (Verse 20) Describing the Qur'ān as a means of insight emphasizes its role of providing enlightenment. The Qur'ān provides insight, and insight makes matters clear. Moreover, the Qur'ān itself is guidance and mercy, but all this is dependent on certainty of faith which admits no doubt or worry. With such certainty, we know the way as it appears before us clear, straight, leading to a well defined goal. We go along this way sure of step and without hesitation. The Qur'ān is our source of light and guidance. It is indeed the embodiment of God's grace.

Totally Unequal

The *sūrah* clearly distinguishes between those who commit evil and those who do good as a result of being believers. There is no way that they can be judged in the same way. They are different in God's sight. Furthermore, God has established His universal law on the basis of truth and justice:

> *Do those who indulge in sinful deeds think that We shall place them, both in their life and their death, on an equal footing with those who believe and do righteous deeds? Flawed is their judgement. God has created the heavens and the earth in accordance with the truth, so that every soul shall be recompensed according to its deeds. None shall be wronged.* (Verses 21–22)

The first of these verses may be understood to refer to those among the people of earlier revelations who deviated from their scriptures and indulged in sin, but who nonetheless continued to think of themselves as believers. They might have thought themselves to be on the same level as Muslims who do good deeds. They might also have considered that the two groups are equal in God's sight, both in this life and in the life after death when people are given their reward or punishment. These verses may also be taken as a general discourse defining how people are judged on God's scales. It shows that believers who do good deeds are definitely in a higher position. It says that putting the evildoers and the righteous on the same level, either in this life or in the next, conflicts with the basic and permanent rule upon which the universe is founded, namely, the truth. Thus the truth is fundamental to both the universe and the Divine law. Consequently, both the universe and human life are set to progress by means of this truth. This manifests itself in the distinction between evildoers and those who do good in all respects, and in the individual judging of people on the basis of what each has earned through life. Justice is, thus, administered to all: "*None shall be wronged.*" (Verse 22) This is the constant truth, the foundational stone of the entire universe.

The *sūrah* then refers to desire, which is by nature changing and fleeting. Yet some people make of desire a deity and thus they are unable to recognize true guidance:

> *Consider the one who takes his own desires as his deity, and whom God has [therefore] let go astray despite his knowledge [of the truth], sealing his ears and heart and placing a cover on his eyes: who can guide such a person after God [has abandoned him]? Will you not, then, take heed?* (Verse 23)

The inimitable Qur'ānic style draws here an extraordinary image of the human soul when it abandons the basic and permanent rule of truth in order to follow fleeting desires, making of them a deity from which concepts, rules, feelings and actions are derived. In this way does man submit to desire and obey its dictates. This extraordinary situation is painted in a tone that invites strong censure.

"*Consider the one who takes his own desires as his deity!*" Such an example should be carefully considered. A person of this ilk deserves to be abandoned by God so that he goes even further astray: no light of guidance will be given to him by Divine mercy. After all, he has left no room in his heart for such guidance when he worships his own desires: "*And whom God has [therefore] let go astray despite his knowledge [of the truth].*" The Arabic phrase, *'alā 'ilm*, may be translated as, 'in full knowledge', in which case it refers to God's knowledge that such a person deserves to be left astray. Alternatively, it can be translated as we have rendered here as '*despite his knowledge*'. In other words, his knowledge of the truth does not deter him from pursuing his desires. Such a person deserves to be left straying in blindness: "*sealing his ears and heart and placing a cover on his eyes.*" His receptive faculties are sealed, allowing no light or guidance to seep through. His judgement is, thus, fundamentally impaired.

"*Who can guide such a person after God [has abandoned him]?*" (Verse 23) All guidance comes from God. No one can provide anyone with guidance or error, not even His chosen messengers. It is all determined by God alone. "*Will you not, then, take heed?*" (Verse 23) When a person takes heed, he will break the chains of desire and return to the straight path of truth. No one who treads this path will ever go astray.

2

To Whom Supremacy Belongs

They say: 'There is nothing beyond our life in this world. We die, we live, nothing but time destroys us.' Of this they have no knowledge whatsoever. They merely guess. (24)

وَقَالُوا مَا هِيَ إِلَّا حَيَاتُنَا الدُّنْيَا نَمُوتُ وَنَحْيَا وَمَا يُهْلِكُنَا إِلَّا الدَّهْرُ ۚ وَمَا لَهُم بِذَٰلِكَ مِنْ عِلْمٍ ۖ إِنْ هُمْ إِلَّا يَظُنُّونَ ﴿٢٤﴾

Whenever Our revelations are recited to them in all their clarity, their only argument is to say: 'Bring back our forefathers, if what you claim be true.' (25)

وَإِذَا تُتْلَىٰ عَلَيْهِمْ آيَاتُنَا بَيِّنَاتٍ مَّا كَانَ حُجَّتَهُمْ إِلَّا أَن قَالُوا ائْتُوا بِآبَائِنَا إِن كُنتُمْ صَادِقِينَ ﴿٢٥﴾

Say: 'It is God who gives you life, then causes you to die; and then He will gather you all on Resurrection Day of which there is no doubt, though most people do not understand.' (26)

قُلِ اللَّهُ يُحْيِيكُمْ ثُمَّ يُمِيتُكُمْ ثُمَّ يَجْمَعُكُمْ إِلَىٰ يَوْمِ الْقِيَامَةِ لَا رَيْبَ فِيهِ وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ النَّاسِ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٢٦﴾

To God belongs the dominion over the heavens and the earth. When the Last Hour strikes, those who follow falsehood will on that Day lose all. (27)

وَلِلَّهِ مُلْكُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ ۚ وَيَوْمَ تَقُومُ السَّاعَةُ يَوْمَئِذٍ يَخْسَرُ الْمُبْطِلُونَ ﴿٢٧﴾

You will see every community on its knees. Every community will be summoned to its record: 'Today you shall be requited for all that you did. (28)

وَتَرَىٰ كُلَّ أُمَّةٍ جَاثِيَةً ۚ كُلُّ أُمَّةٍ تُدْعَىٰ إِلَىٰ كِتَابِهَا
الْيَوْمَ تُجْزَوْنَ مَا كُنتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٢٨﴾

This Our record speaks of you in all truth; for We have been recording everything you do.' (29)

هَٰذَا كِتَابُنَا يَنطِقُ عَلَيْكُم بِالْحَقِّ ۚ إِنَّا كُنَّا
نَسْتَنسِخُ مَا كُنتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٢٩﴾

Those who believed and did righteous deeds will be admitted by their Lord into His grace. That will be the manifest triumph. (30)

فَأَمَّا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ
فَيُدْخِلُهُمْ رَبُّهُمْ فِي رَحْمَتِهِ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ هُوَ
الْفَوْزُ الْمُبِينُ ﴿٣٠﴾

And as for the unbelievers, [they will be asked]: 'When My revelations were recited to you, did you not glory in your arrogance and persist in your wicked ways? (31)

وَأَمَّا الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا أَفَلَمْ تَكُنْ آيَاتِي تُتْلَىٰ
عَلَيْكُمْ فَاسْتَكْبَرْتُمْ وَكُنتُمْ قَوْمًا مُّجْرِمِينَ ﴿٣١﴾

For when it was said, "God's promise will certainly come true, and there can be no doubt about the Last Hour," you would answer, "We know nothing of the Last Hour. We think it is all conjecture, and we are by no means convinced."' (32)

وَإِذَا قِيلَ إِنَّ وَعْدَ اللَّهِ حَقٌّ وَالسَّاعَةُ لَا رَيْبَ
فِيهَا قُلْتُم مَّا نَدْرِي مَا السَّاعَةُ إِن نَّظُنُّ
إِلَّا ظَنًّا وَمَا نَحْنُ بِمُسْتَيْقِنِينَ ﴿٣٢﴾

وَبَدَا لَهُمْ سَيِّئَاتُ مَا عَمِلُوا وَحَاقَ بِهِم
مَّا كَانُوا بِهِ يَسْتَهْزِئُونَ ﴿٣٣﴾

The evil of their deeds will become clear to them, and they will be overwhelmed by the very thing they used to deride. (33)

وَقِيلَ الْيَوْمَ نَنسَاكُمْ كَمَا نَسِيتُمْ لِقَاءَ
يَوْمِكُمْ هَٰذَا وَمَأْوَاكُمُ النَّارُ وَمَا لَكُم
مِّن نَّاصِرِينَ ﴿٣٤﴾

It will be said to them: 'Today We shall be oblivious of you as you were oblivious of the coming of this your Day! The fire will be your abode, and you will have no one to help you. (34)

ذَٰلِكُم بِأَنَّكُمُ اتَّخَذْتُمْ آيَاتِ اللَّهِ هُزُوًا
وَغَرَّتْكُمُ الْحَيَاةُ الدُّنْيَا ۚ فَالْيَوْمَ لَا يُخْرَجُونَ
مِنْهَا وَلَا هُمْ يُسْتَعْتَبُونَ ﴿٣٥﴾

Thus it is, because you received God's revelations with ridicule and allowed the life of this world to beguile you.' Therefore, they will not be brought out of the Fire on that Day, nor will they be given a chance to make amends. (35)

فَلِلَّهِ الْحَمْدُ رَبِّ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَرَبِّ الْأَرْضِ
رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿٣٦﴾

All praise is due to God, the Lord of the heavens, the Lord of the earth and the Lord of all the worlds. (36)

وَلَهُ الْكِبْرِيَاءُ فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ ۖ
وَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ ﴿٣٧﴾

His alone is all supremacy in the heavens and the earth. He alone is the Almighty, the Wise. (37)

Overview

This last passage of the *sūrah* presents what the idolaters used to say about the hereafter, resurrection and accountability on the Day of Judgement. It refutes their arguments, citing irrefutable evidence drawn from their own particular situation. It then portrays a scene from the Day of Judgement which they see as closing in upon them, even though it is not as yet due. This is because the Qur'ānic style presents it as if it is there before their very eyes.

The *sūrah* then concludes with praises of God, the only Lord of the heavens and the earth and all those who live within them. His glory is extolled and no one can aspire to His position of absolute power.

A Narrow View of Life

> *They say: 'There is nothing beyond our life in this world. We die, we live, nothing but time destroys us.' Of this they have no knowledge whatsoever. They merely guess. Whenever Our revelations are recited to them in all their clarity, their only argument is to say: 'Bring back our forefathers, if what you claim be true.' Say: 'It is God who gives you life, then causes you to die; and then He will gather you all on Resurrection Day of which there is no doubt, though most people do not understand.'* (Verses 24–26)

So short-sighted were they that they considered life to be nothing beyond what they saw before their very eyes: one generation dies and another replaces it in life. Apparently, no hand deals death; it is all a question of days that pass and time that elapses bringing death to all. It is time, then, that ends their lives, making them die. This is a superficial outlook that does not go beyond appearances to discover subtle reasons and causes. They do not ask what brings them life; or, when it is there, what takes it away? They see that death does not occur according to a defined system or after a certain number of days and years. Instead, they think that only the passage of time deprives them of life. Death comes to all: children and the elderly, the healthy and the ill, the strong and the weak. Therefore, when we carefully

consider the reason behind all this, time is an inadequate explanation. Therefore, God says of them: "*Of this they have no knowledge whatsoever. They merely guess.*" (Verse 24) Their guesses are wild, lack proper reflection, sound knowledge and an understanding of cause and effect. They do not look carefully at the two phenomena of life and death to realize that they are the result of a will other than that of man and a reason other than the passage of time.

"*Whenever Our revelations are recited to them in all their clarity, their only argument is to say: 'Bring back our forefathers, if what you claim be true.'*" (Verse 25) This is a similarly superficial outlook devoid of any understanding of the laws of creation, God's wisdom or the secret that lies beyond life and death. People live on this planet so that they have a chance to work towards their ultimate destiny. Thus, God tests them by means of what He places at their disposal in this life. They then die and await the time of reckoning determined by Him. They will account for what they did in this life. Therefore, when they die, they do not return to this world. No purpose is served by such a return before the appointed time. They will not return merely because a group of human beings suggest they should. The major laws God has set in operation in the universe are not changed as a result of human suggestion. There is no question whatsoever of their naïvety in answer to God's revelations being taken up: "*Bring back our forefathers, if what you claim be true.*" (Verse 25)

Why should God bring back their forefathers before the time He, in His infinite wisdom, has determined? To convince them that God is able to bring the dead back to life? How amazing! Do they not see that God initiates life at every moment before their very eyes, in accordance with the law He has set for life? "*Say: It is God who gives you life, then causes you to die; and then He will gather you all on Resurrection Day of which there is no doubt.*" (Verse 26) The very miracle they want to see done to their fathers occurs before their very eyes. It is God who grants life and causes death. There is nothing surprising, then, that He will bring the dead back to life, gathering them all on Resurrection Day. Why should they entertain any doubt about this, when they see it occurring before them: "*Though most people do not understand.*" (Verse 26)

The Qur'ān's comment on this visible fact cites the origin of all: "*To God belongs the dominion over the heavens and the earth.*" (Verse 27) He is the One who makes and controls everything in the universe, and He is the One able to originate and reinstate everything and everyone.

The Record of All Deeds

They are now presented with a scene from the day that they doubt will ever come:

> *When the Last Hour strikes, those who follow falsehood will on that Day lose all. You will see every community on its knees. Every community will be summoned to its record: 'Today you shall be requited for all that you did. This Our record speaks of you in all truth; for We have been recording everything you do.'* (Verses 27–29)

In the first of these verses they are told of the fate of those who follow falsehood. They are the ones who end up in utter loss. Then we are given a panoramic view, with all the generations that have dwelled on the surface of this planet throughout the ages gathered together. They all sit on their knees, each community distinguished from the next, but all awaiting their dreaded accountability. The atmosphere is one of awe and fear. How can it be otherwise, when the assembly brings together everyone from all generations, and they are all on their knees? Greater fear is inspired by what lies ahead of people having to account for their deeds. What generates most fear, however, is that they have to face God Almighty, the Most Gracious, whose blessings were not met with gratitude, on earth, by most of those gathered before Him.

All those waiting on their knees look anxiously, breathless and with dry mouths. They are told: "*Today you shall be requited for all that you did. This Our record speaks of you in all truth; for We have been recording everything you do.*" (Verses 28–29) All of them, belonging to different communities, races and generations, are split into two groups – believers and unbelievers – for there is no other banner to raise on that occasion. One is God's party and the other is Satan's.

"*Those who believed and did righteous deeds will be admitted by their Lord into His grace. That will be the manifest triumph.*" (Verse 30) They are the ones who are given comfort to dispel all worry and anxiety. The outcome of their situation is given straightaway, easily and without delay, so as to spread over them a pleasant air. But what do we find as we stretch our eyes through the words of the text to look at the other party? We hear a long and shameful rebuke one that reminds them of their worst sayings and deeds:

> *And as for the unbelievers, [they will be asked]: When My revelations were recited to you, did you not glory in your arrogance and persist in your wicked ways? For when it was said, 'God's promise will certainly come true, and there can be no doubt about the Last Hour,' you would answer, 'We know nothing of the Last Hour. We think it is all conjecture, and we are by no means convinced.'"* (Verses 31–32)

How do you view your situation now? Are you convinced? Then the *sūrah* turns away for a moment to give us a glimpse of what happens to them: "*The evil of their deeds will become clear to them, and they will be overwhelmed by the very thing they used to deride.*" (Verse 33) Further reproach is heaped upon their heads, and they are told that their lot will be nothing other than total disregard, humiliation as well as painful doom:

> *It will be said to them: 'Today We shall be oblivious of you as you were oblivious of the coming of this your Day! The fire will be your abode, and you will have no one to help you. Thus it is, because you received God's revelations with ridicule and allowed the life of this world to beguile you.'* (Verses 34–35)

As their ultimate fate is announced, the curtains are drawn leaving them in hell from which they cannot hope to leave and where they are not asked for excuses or justification: "*Therefore, they will not be brought out of the Fire on that Day, nor will they be given a chance to make amends.*" (Verse 35) As we listen, we almost hear the doors of

hell as they are finally closed. The scene is completed; nothing of it will change.

The *sūrah* concludes with voices praising and glorifying God:

> *All praise is due to God, the Lord of the heavens, the Lord of the earth and the Lord of all the worlds. His alone is all supremacy in the heavens and the earth. He alone is the Almighty, the Wise.* (Verses 36–37)

The praising voice declares God's Lordship over the universe: earth and heaven, mankind and *jinn*, birds and beasts, as well as everyone and everything. They are all under the care of one Lord who is totally in control. Praised is He for the care He takes of them all. The glorifying voice declares that all supremacy in the universe belongs to God alone. To Him bows every exalted tyrant, and to His power submits every rebellious nature. Furthermore, to Him belongs the supreme power and absolute wisdom. Praise and glory to God, the Lord of all the worlds.

SŪRAH 46

Al-Aḥqāf

(Sand Dunes)

Prologue

The present *sūrah*, revealed in Makkah, addresses the question of faith: belief in God's oneness and His absolute Lordship of the universe. As in other Makkan *sūrahs*, faith here also includes belief in the revelation of the Divine message to Muḥammad, God's messenger, who was preceded by other messengers, and to whom the Qur'ān was bestowed from on high, confirming earlier scriptures. It also includes belief in the resurrection and accountability for all that is done in this present life, whether good or evil.

These are the fundamental principles upon which Islam builds its whole structure. Hence, the Qur'ān elaborates on these principles in all the Makkan *sūrahs*. It also touches upon these aspects in the *sūrahs* revealed later in Madīnah, and specifically whenever it lays down legislation or addresses a directive to the Muslim community. Part of the nature of the Islamic faith is that it considers belief in God's oneness, Muḥammad's message and accountability in the life to come the pivot upon which all its principles, systems, laws and morality turn. All are closely related to this belief. Therefore, they remain proactive.

The *sūrah* treats this question of faith in every possible way, presenting it against different backdrops and adding universal, psychological and historical effects. It makes faith a question for all

existence, not merely the human race. It gives us a glimpse of how some of the *jinn* listened to the Qur'ān, and refers to the attitude of some of the Children of Israel to it, presenting one testimony from uncorrupted human nature and another from some Israelites. It takes us on a journey so that we can look at the expanse of the heavens and the earth, and it also presents images from the Day of Judgement. It further shows us the fate of the people of Hūd, and touches on the fates of some of the townships around Makkah. According to the *sūrah*, both the universe itself and the Qur'ān are books stating the same truth.

The *sūrah* consists of four inter-related parts that can be seen as a single whole. The first part begins with the two separate letters *Ḥā Mīm*, that also began the six *sūrahs* preceding this one. These two letters are immediately followed by a reference to the book of the Qur'ān and its being a revelation from God: "*This book is bestowed from on high by God, the Almighty, the Wise.*" (Verse 2) The *sūrah* follows this with a reference to the book of the universe, which is established on the basis of His truth and created according to elaborate planning. "*We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them otherwise than in accordance with the truth, and for an appointed term.*" (Verse 3) Thus, the recited book of the Qur'ān and the book of the universe we behold confirm the truth as well as the elaborate planning: "*Yet the unbelievers ignore the warnings they have been given.*" (Verse 3)

After this powerful and comprehensive opening, the *sūrah* begins to present the question of faith, starting with a denunciation of polytheism, upheld by the pagan Arabs, demonstrating that it lacks all basis in the universe, and that it further lacks true pronouncement and inherited knowledge: "*Say: Have you thought of those whom you invoke besides God? Show me what part of the earth they have created, or which share of the heavens they own. Bring me a book revealed before this, or some other vestige of knowledge, if what you claim is true.*" (Verse 4) It shows the error of the one who worships instead of God someone or thing who cannot hear or respond to its worshipper and who disputes with him on the Day of Judgement dissociating itself from all such worship.

It then speaks of the appalling reception they gave to the truth as presented by Muḥammad (peace be upon him), describing it as plain sorcery. (Verse 7) They even had the temerity to go further than this and alleged that the Prophet had fabricated it all. The *sūrah* instructs the Prophet to give them a reply that suits his position as a messenger of God, one that reflects his fear of God and accepts His judgement both in this world and the next: "*Say: 'If I have invented it, you cannot be of the least help to me against God. He is fully aware of what you say amongst yourselves about it. Sufficient is He as a witness between me and you. He is Much-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful.' Say: 'I am not the first of God's messengers. I do not know what will be done with me or with you. I only follow what is being revealed to me. I am only a plain warner.'*" (Verses 8–9) It also cites the attitude of some of the Children of Israel who accepted the Qur'ān as true guidance when they found in it what confirmed the scriptures given to Moses (peace be upon him). Such a person "*has believed in it while you glory in your arrogance.*" (Verse 10) They are, thus, denounced for their wrongdoing, for their disbelief, despite the testimony of those endowed with greater knowledge: "*God does not guide wrongdoers.*" (Verse 10)

The *sūrah* also mentions the unbelievers' flimsy justification of their attitude as they said in reference to the believers: "*If this [message] were any good, these people would not have preceded us in accepting it.*" (Verse 11) This explains their true stance: "*Since they refuse to be guided by it, they will always say, 'This is an ancient falsehood.'*" (Verse 11) The *sūrah* also refers to the book of Moses and the fact that the Qur'ān confirms it, highlighting its role: "*to warn the wrongdoers and to give good news to those who do good.*" (Verse 12) This part concludes with details of the good news given to those who believe in God and follow the right course: "*Those who say, 'Our Lord is God,' and follow the straight path shall have nothing to fear, nor shall they grieve. They are the ones destined for paradise where they shall abide as a reward for what they do.*" (Verses 13–14)

The second part of the *sūrah* portrays two patterns of human nature, one upright and the other deviant, highlighting their different attitudes to the question of faith. It depicts both natures as they commence their lives, reared by their parents. It describes their respective attitudes

when they come of age and are able to make their own choices. The first recognizes God's blessings, is dutiful towards his parents, eager to give thanks, and seeking forgiveness for slips and mistakes: "*It is from such people that We shall accept the best that they ever did, and whose bad deeds We shall overlook. [They shall be] among the people destined for paradise. True is the promise that has been given them.*" (Verse 16) The other is disobedient of both his parents and God, denies the Day of Resurrection, and creates tremendous distress for his parents: "*Such are the ones upon whom the verdict is passed, together with other communities of* jinn *and humans that have passed away before their time. They will be utterly lost.*" (Verse 18) This part of the *sūrah* concludes with a swift scene of the Day of Judgement portraying the fate of this second type of person: "*On the Day when the unbelievers will be brought before the fire, they will be told: You have exhausted your share of good things in your worldly life and took your fill of pleasure. So, today you shall be requited with the suffering of humiliation for having been arrogant on earth without any right, and for all your transgression.*" (Verse 20)

In the third part, the *sūrah* speaks of the destruction of the 'Ād after they had rejected all warnings. It highlights the great wind which they had expected to give them rain and growth. Instead, it brought them ruin and the punishment they had hastened. "*When they saw a cloud approaching their valleys, they said: 'This cloud will bring us rain.' 'No, indeed. It is the very thing you wanted to hasten: a stormwind bearing painful suffering which will destroy everything by the command of its Lord.' When the morning came, there was nothing to see of them except their ruined dwellings. Thus do we requite guilty people.*" (Verses 24–25) In this way, the *sūrah* aims to heighten the unbelievers' feelings by showing them the fate of the 'Ād, who they are reminded were stronger and wealthier than they. "*We had securely established them in a manner in which We have never established you; and We had endowed them with hearing, and sight, and hearts. Yet nothing did their hearing, sight and hearts avail them since they persisted in denying God's revelations. They were overwhelmed by the very thing which they had mocked.*" (Verse 26) As this part comes to an end, the *sūrah* also reminds them of the fate suffered by the townships around them and how their alleged

deities could not provide any support. Thus, their fabrications were clear for everyone to see.

The fourth and final part gives us the story of a group of *jinn* who were directed by God to listen to a recitation of the Qur'ān. They were highly moved by it, immediately declaring that it speaks the truth and confirms "*what came before it. It guides to the truth and to a straight path.*" (Verse 30) They went straight back to their people warning them and calling on them to believe: "*Our people! Respond to God's call and have faith in Him. He will forgive you your sins and deliver you from grievous suffering. He who does not respond to God's call cannot elude Him on earth, nor will they have any protector against Him. They are indeed in manifest error.*" (Verses 31–32) The *jinn* also refer to the open book of the universe which testifies to God's power of initiation and resurrection: "*Are they not aware that God, who has created the heavens and the earth and was not wearied by their creation, has the power to bring the dead back to life? Yes, indeed. He has power over all things.*" (Verse 33) At this point the *sūrah* adds a touching scene, showing the unbelievers as they are brought before the fire. They will then admit what they used to deny, but it is all too late.

The *sūrah* concludes with a directive to the Prophet to remain patient and not to hasten the unbelievers' punishment. They are only given respite for a short while, and God's punishment will inevitably catch up with them: "*Remain, then, patient in adversity, just as all messengers endowed with firm resolve bore themselves with patience. Do not seek to hasten their punishment. On the Day when they see what they were promised, it will seem to them as though they had dwelt [on earth] no more than an hour in a single day. This has been made clear. Will, then, any be destroyed except the evildoers?*" (Verse 35)

I

One Universe, One Creator

Al-Aḥqāf (Sand Dunes)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

Ḥā. Mīm. (1)

حمٓ ١

This book is bestowed from on high by God, the Almighty, the Wise. (2)

تَنزِيلُ ٱلْكِتَٰبِ مِنَ ٱللَّهِ ٱلْعَزِيزِ ٱلْحَكِيمِ ٢

We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them otherwise than in accordance with the truth, and for an appointed term. Yet the unbelievers ignore the warnings they have been given. (3)

مَا خَلَقْنَا ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضَ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَآ
إِلَّا بِٱلْحَقِّ وَأَجَلٍ مُّسَمًّى ۚ وَٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟
عَمَّآ أُنذِرُوا۟ مُعْرِضُونَ ٣

Say: 'Have you thought of those whom you invoke besides God? Show me what part of the earth they have created, or which share of the heavens they own. Bring

قُلْ أَرَءَيْتُم مَّا تَدْعُونَ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ
أَرُونِى مَاذَا خَلَقُوا۟ مِنَ ٱلْأَرْضِ أَمْ لَهُمْ
شِرْكٌ فِى ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ ۖ ٱئْتُونِى بِكِتَٰبٍ

me a book revealed before this, or some other vestige of knowledge, if what you claim is true.' (4)

مِّن قَبْلِ هَٰذَآ أَوْ أَثَٰرَةٍ مِّنْ عِلْمٍ
إِن كُنتُمْ صَٰدِقِينَ ﴿٤﴾

Who is in greater error than one who invokes, instead of God, such as will not respond to him till the Day of Resurrection, and are not even conscious of being invoked? (5)

وَمَنْ أَضَلُّ مِمَّن يَدْعُوا۟ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ مَن
لَّا يَسْتَجِيبُ لَهُۥٓ إِلَىٰ يَوْمِ ٱلْقِيَٰمَةِ وَهُمْ عَن
دُعَآئِهِمْ غَٰفِلُونَ ﴿٥﴾

When all mankind are gathered [for judgement], these will be enemies to them and will disown their worship. (6)

وَإِذَا حُشِرَ ٱلنَّاسُ كَانُوا۟ لَهُمْ أَعْدَآءً وَكَانُوا۟
بِعِبَادَتِهِمْ كَٰفِرِينَ ﴿٦﴾

Whenever Our revelations are recited to them in all their clarity, the unbelievers describe the truth when it is delivered to them: 'This is plain sorcery.' (7)

وَإِذَا تُتْلَىٰ عَلَيْهِمْ ءَايَٰتُنَا بَيِّنَٰتٍ قَالَ
ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ لِلْحَقِّ لَمَّا جَآءَهُمْ هَٰذَا
سِحْرٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٧﴾

Do they say: 'He has invented it himself'? Say: 'If I have invented it, you cannot be of the least help to me against God. He is fully aware of what you say amongst yourselves about it. Sufficient is He as a witness between me and you. He is Much-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful.' (8)

أَمْ يَقُولُونَ ٱفْتَرَىٰهُ ۖ قُلْ إِنِ ٱفْتَرَيْتُهُۥ
فَلَا تَمْلِكُونَ لِى مِنَ ٱللَّهِ شَيْـًٔا ۖ
هُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا تُفِيضُونَ فِيهِ ۖ كَفَىٰ
بِهِۦ شَهِيدًۢا بَيْنِى وَبَيْنَكُمْ ۖ وَهُوَ
ٱلْغَفُورُ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ﴿٨﴾

Say: 'I am not the first of God's messengers. I do not know what will be done with me or with you. I only follow what is being revealed to me. I am only a plain warner.' (9)

قُلْ مَا كُنتُ بِدْعًا مِّنَ الرُّسُلِ وَمَا أَدْرِي
مَا يُفْعَلُ بِي وَلَا بِكُمْ إِنْ أَتَّبِعُ إِلَّا مَا يُوحَىٰ
إِلَيَّ وَمَا أَنَا إِلَّا نَذِيرٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٩﴾

Say: 'Have you thought: what if this Qur'ān is really from God and you reject it? What if a witness from among the Children of Israel testifies to its similarity [to earlier scriptures], and has believed in it while you glory in your arrogance? God does not guide wrongdoers.' (10)

قُلْ أَرَءَيْتُمْ إِن كَانَ مِنْ عِندِ ٱللَّهِ
وَكَفَرْتُم بِهِۦ وَشَهِدَ شَاهِدٌ مِّنۢ
بَنِىٓ إِسْرَٰٓءِيلَ عَلَىٰ مِثْلِهِۦ فَـَٔامَنَ
وَٱسْتَكْبَرْتُمْ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَا يَهْدِى
ٱلْقَوْمَ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ﴿١٠﴾

The unbelievers say of those who believe: 'If this [message] were any good, these people would not have preceded us in accepting it.' Since they refuse to be guided by it, they will always say, 'This is an ancient falsehood.' (11)

وَقَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ لِلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟
لَوْ كَانَ خَيْرًا مَّا سَبَقُونَآ إِلَيْهِ وَإِذْ لَمْ
يَهْتَدُوا۟ بِهِۦ فَسَيَقُولُونَ هَٰذَآ
إِفْكٌ قَدِيمٌ ﴿١١﴾

Yet before this the book of Moses was revealed as a guide and a [sign of God's] grace. This book confirms it in the Arabic tongue, to warn the wrongdoers and to give good news to those who do good. (12)

وَمِن قَبْلِهِۦ كِتَٰبُ مُوسَىٰٓ إِمَامًا
وَرَحْمَةً وَهَٰذَا كِتَٰبٌ مُّصَدِّقٌ
لِّسَانًا عَرَبِيًّا لِّيُنذِرَ ٱلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا۟
وَبُشْرَىٰ لِلْمُحْسِنِينَ ﴿١٢﴾

Those who say, 'Our Lord is God', and follow the straight path shall have nothing to fear, nor shall they grieve. (13)	إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ قَالُوا۟ رَبُّنَا ٱللَّهُ ثُمَّ ٱسْتَقَٰمُوا۟ فَلَا خَوْفٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا هُمْ يَحْزَنُونَ ﴿١٣﴾
They are the ones destined for paradise where they shall abide as a reward for what they do. (14)	أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ أَصْحَٰبُ ٱلْجَنَّةِ خَٰلِدِينَ فِيهَا جَزَآءًۢ بِمَا كَانُوا۟ يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

In Line with the Truth

> Ḥā. Mīm. *This book is bestowed from on high by God, the Almighty, the Wise. We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them otherwise than in accordance with the truth, and for an appointed term. Yet the unbelievers ignore the warnings they have been given.* (Verses 1–3)

As the *sūrah* opens it touches on the link between the letters of the Arabic language they speak and the Qur'ān, a book composed of the same letters but unlike anything people say or write. This, in itself, is sufficient evidence to testify to the fact that the Qur'ān is revealed from on high by God, the Almighty, the Wise. It also touches on the relationship between God's recited book and the book of the universe we behold and which He made. Both books are made with the truth and according to careful planning. The fact that the Qur'ān is bestowed from on high by the Almighty testifies to His power and absolute wisdom. Likewise, the creation of the universe is an act of truth: "*We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them otherwise than in accordance with the truth.*" (Verse 3) It is subject to elaborate planning: "*and for an appointed term.*" (Verse 3) Thus, God's purpose behind creation is fulfilled and all that He has willed through the process of creation is accomplished.

Both books are open, available to ears and eyes to contemplate. Each testifies to God's power and wisdom, indicating His planning. Indeed the book of the universe affirms the truth of the revealed book and its

promises and warnings. "*Yet the unbelievers ignore the warnings they have been given.*" (Verse 3) This is indeed most singular.

The revealed book states that the Godhead is One and that He is the Lord of everything, since He is the Creator who controls and determines all. The book of the universe also affirms this same truth: its system, balance and harmony confirm that the Maker is the One who makes everything on the basis of comprehensive and unerring knowledge. Indeed, everything bears the same mark of the One Maker. How can anyone then claim that there are deities other than Him? What have such alleged deities created? What share do they have in the universe? "*Say: Have you thought of those whom you invoke besides God? Show me what part of the earth they have created, or which share of the heavens they own. Bring me a book revealed before this, or some other vestige of knowledge, if what you claim is true.*" (Verse 4)

Thus, God instructs His messenger to put before people the testimony of the book of the universe, as it admits no dispute and addresses human nature according to its own logic. "*Show me what part of the earth they have created.*" No one will ever say that such worshipped deities, be they statues made of stone, trees, *jinn*, angels or any other, ever created any part of the earth or anything that lives on earth. Human nature flies in the face of anyone making such a suggestion. "*Or which share of the heavens they own?*" (Verse 4) Nor will any human being claim that any worshipped deity has ever had any share in the creation of the heavens, or that they own any share in them. A glance at the sky is sufficient to fill our hearts with a clear sense of the Creator's greatness and oneness, and to discard all deviant beliefs and absurdities. God, who bestowed the Qur'ān from on high, knows the effect of contemplating the universe on people's minds and hearts. Therefore, He directs us to look at the book of the universe and listen to its message.

Some people, however, make assertions that rely on neither proof nor evidence. The Qur'ān does not allow them much leeway in this respect. Instead it requires that they provide evidence and proof in support of their claims and teaches them the method of proof putting before them a complete system of consideration, reflection and conclusion drawing: "*Bring me a book revealed before this, or some other*

vestige of knowledge, if what you claim is true." (Verse 4) Thus, they have to rely either on a true book revealed by God, or a proved piece of evidence that has survived over time. All books revealed before the Qur'ān emphatically assert the oneness of God, the Creator. None of them assigns even a shred of validity to the legends that speak of multiple deities, or suggests that they have any share in the creation of the earth or the ownership of the heavens. Nor is there any vestige of knowledge to support such absurd claims.

Thus the Qur'ān puts before them the testimony of the universe, which is clear and decisive, discounts any claim that has no supporting evidence and teaches them the method of proof; all this in one verse using a small number of words, but with strong rhythm and sound argument.

The Qur'ān also invites them to take an objective look at those beings alleged to be deities. It points to the obvious error behind such claims when these entities can neither respond to them nor show any awareness of them in this present life. Furthermore, they will stand against the unbelievers on the Day of Resurrection, denying all their claims:

> *Who is in greater error than one who invokes, instead of God, such as will not respond to him till the Day of Resurrection, and are not even conscious of being invoked? When all mankind are gathered [for judgement], these will be enemies to them and will disown their worship.* (Verses 5–6)

Some of the unbelievers considered their idols to be deities, either in themselves or as statues representing the angels. Others worshipped trees while still others worshipped the angels directly or even Satan. Yet none of these so-called deities respond to those invoking them, or at least make a useful response. Statues and trees give no response whatsoever, angels do not respond to anyone who associates partners with God, while the devils' response is only one of whispering and leading people astray. Then, on the Day of Resurrection, when all are gathered before their Lord, all alleged deities disown their errant worshippers. Even Satan disowns them, as clearly stated in another *sūrah*: "*And when everything will have been decided, Satan will say:*

'God has made you a true promise. I, too, made promises to you, but I did not keep them. Yet I had no power at all over you, except that I called you and you responded to me. Hence, do not now blame me, but blame yourselves. It is not for me to respond to your cries, nor for you to respond to mine. I have already disclaimed your associating me with God.' Indeed, for all wrongdoers there is grievous suffering in store." (14: 22)

Thus, after having explained to them the universal truth that rejects their claims, the Qur'ān puts their own claims before their eyes, showing them what effect these claims have in this world and in the life to come. In both, the truth of God's oneness is clearly seen as the book of the universe proves it. The idolaters should espouse this if they care about what happens to them in this life and in the life to come.

This strong denunciation of idolatry referred, at the time of Qur'ānic revelation, to the deities worshipped by different communities during different periods of history. However, the Qur'ānic statements in this case have a broader significance and farther application than the historical situation then pertaining. What error is greater than one creature invoking another instead of God, at any time and place? Every creature thus invoked, regardless of its identity and status, will not and cannot make any response to those who invoke it. It is God alone who does what He wants. Polytheism is not limited to the naïve form practised by the idolaters of old. Many are those who associate with God partners from among people who have power, influence, wealth or position; they appeal to them for help. Yet these are also too weak to make any significant response to their appealers. None has any power to cause benefit or harm even to themselves. Appealing to them, placing hope in them and fearing them are all forms of subtle idolatry, which is unfortunately practised by many even though they do not recognize it as such.

A Wild Claim

The *sūrah* now discusses their attitude towards the Prophet and his true message, establishing the truth of revelation as it has already established the truth of God's oneness:

> *Whenever Our revelations are recited to them in all their clarity, the unbelievers describe the truth when it is delivered to them: 'This is plain sorcery.' Do they say: 'He has invented it himself'? Say: 'If I have invented it, you cannot be of the least help to me against God. He is fully aware of what you say amongst yourselves about it. Sufficient is He as a witness between me and you. He is Much-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful. Say: 'I am not the first of God's messengers. I do not know what will be done with me or with you. I only follow what is being revealed to me. I am only a plain warner. Say: 'Have you thought: what if this Qur'ān is really from God and you reject it? What if a witness from among the Children of Israel testifies to its similarity [to earlier scriptures], and has believed in it while you glory in your arrogance? God does not guide wrongdoers.' The unbelievers say of those who believe: 'If this [message] were any good, these people would not have preceded us in accepting it.' Since they refuse to be guided by it, they will always say, 'This is an ancient falsehood.' Yet before this the book of Moses was revealed as a guide and a [sign of God's] grace. This book confirms it in the Arabic tongue, to warn the wrongdoers and to give good news to those who do good.* (Verses 7–12)

The *sūrah* first rebukes them for the reception they gave to God's revelations when it is given 'in all clarity', free of ambiguity, leaving no room for doubt. Besides, it presents the indisputable truth. Yet they describe this revelation as '*plain sorcery*'. As we all know, truth is vastly different from sorcery; the two cannot be confused or viewed in the same way. Thus the *sūrah* begins its discussion by refuting their ridiculous claims.

It then picks up on their other claim alleging that the Prophet had '*invented*' it. It states this in the form of a question, not a report, giving the impression that such a thing cannot be made or at least is unlikely to be made: "*Do they say: 'He has invented it himself'?*" (Verse 8) What a shameless claim! The Prophet is instructed to reply to them in all the politeness that fits his position as a prophet of God, reflecting his understanding of his Lord and his mission, as well as his knowledge of the true power and values in the universe: "*Say: If I have invented it, you cannot be of the least help to me against God. He is fully aware of*

what you say amongst yourselves about it. Sufficient is He as a witness between me and you. He is Much-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful." (Verse 8)

Essentially, the Prophet is instructed to ask them: how, for whose interest and for what objective would I invent it? Would I invent it so that you can believe in and follow me? If this is the case, you cannot help me in the least against God. He will surely hold me to account. What use would it be to me if you follow me, when you cannot give me the slightest support or protection when God punishes me for such invention?

This is a fit response from a Prophet who is instructed by God, and who recognizes no power in the universe other than His. Besides, it is a logical response which, when objectively considered, appears to the addressees to be truly valid. The Prophet makes this response and leaves them to God for judgement: "*He is fully aware of what you say amongst yourselves about it.*" (Verse 8) He is a witness to all that they say and do, and this is enough to ensure a fair judgement: "*Sufficient is He as a witness between me and you.*" Yet, "*He is Much-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful.*" (Verse 8) He may treat you with compassion, bestow His grace on you and guide you, forgiving you your earlier error. It is a response, then, that combines warning with persuasion. It gently touches hearts and makes people realize that the matter is far too serious to be left to their absurdities.

Yet another argument is provided, this time drawing on realities. Why do they reject the idea of a Divine message being given through revelation? Why are they so quick to denounce it as sorcery or as an invention, when there is nothing strange or unusual about it? "*Say: I am not the first of God's messengers. I do not know what will be done with me or with you. I only follow what is being revealed to me. I am only a plain warner.*" (Verse 9)

The Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) was not a totally new phenomenon: he was one in a line of God's messengers. His situation was the same as all messengers who preceded him. He was an ordinary human being whom God knew to be suited to deliver His message. Therefore, He gave him His revelations and the Prophet carried out God's orders. This is what a Divine message is like. When a messenger of God feels this bond, he does not ask God for proof, nor does he

request anything special for himself; he simply moves on to deliver God's message as it is revealed to him. "*I do not know what will be done with me or with you. I only follow what is being revealed to me.*" He gets on with the task of delivering his message, not because of any knowledge he has of the realm that lies beyond human perception, nor because of any information given to him about what will happen to him, his people or his message. He simply follows instructions, trusting his Lord, submitting himself to Him. The future is unknown to him; its secrets are with his Lord and he does not seek to know them. He has all the reassurance he needs, and he realizes that the proper attitude for him is not to look beyond the limits of the mission he has been assigned: "*I am only a plain warner.*" (Verse 9)

Those advocates of Islam endowed with profound insight into its message follow in the footsteps of the Prophet and find the same reassurance. They carry on with their advocacy of the Divine message seeking neither personal gain nor self interest. They do not know what the future holds for it or for them. They do not ask their Lord for evidence; they have all the evidence they need in their hearts. Nor do they pray for any special favour; it is sufficient favour for them that they follow this line. They discharge their duty, and this is enough for them. They do not overstep the fine line God has demarcated for them.

The *sūrah* then puts before the unbelievers a witness who is close at hand and whose testimony is particularly relevant because he belongs to an earlier Divine religion whose followers are aware of the nature of revelation:

> *Say: 'Have you thought: what if this Qur'ān is really from God and you reject it? What if a witness from among the Children of Israel testifies to its similarity [to earlier scriptures], and has believed in it while you glory in your arrogance? God does not guide wrongdoers.'* (Verse 10)

This verse may refer to one or more of the Jews who, knowing the nature of the Torah, recognized that the Qur'ān had the same nature as earlier revealed books and, therefore, declared themselves believers in Islam. There are reports that it refers specifically to 'Abdullāh ibn

Sallām. However, this *sūrah* was revealed in Makkah, and 'Abdullāh ibn Sallām only adopted Islam when the Prophet later migrated to Madīnah. Other reports suggest that this verse was revealed in Madīnah, thus confirming that it refers to this particular individual. Still other reports suggest that the verse was revealed in Makkah and hence would not refer to him. It may also be that the verse refers to a different situation that took place when the Prophet was still advocating his message in Makkah, when a small number of followers of earlier Divine religions adopted Islam. This would have been particularly significant for the idolater Arabs. Hence, the Qur'ān refers to it more than once, delivering a strong counter argument to those idolaters who rejected the Divine message without any basis.

The *sūrah* uses a special style in presenting its argument to them: "*Have you thought: what if this Qur'ān is really from God and you reject it?...*" (Verse 10) It aims to shake their stubborn rejection and raise a fear within them concerning the eventual result. Since there is a possibility that the Qur'ān may really be from God, as Muḥammad (peace be upon him) says, should they not take precautions lest their rejection of it brings them to a terrible end? Could all the warnings it provides come true? Would they not be better advised to reflect on the whole matter lest they leave themselves open to all that it warns them against? Taking such precautions is all the wiser, considering that one or more of the people of Divine faiths confirmed that the Qur'ān is of the same nature as earlier revealed scriptures, and followed this by declaring their belief in it. By contrast, they, whose language the Qur'ān speaks, persist with their rejection. This is indeed blatant wrongdoing as it suppresses the truth. It deserves God's punishment: "*God does not guide wrongdoers.*" (Verse 10)

The *sūrah* continues to report what the pagan Arabs said about the Qur'ān and Islam. It specifically mentions their arrogance as they try to show themselves as superior to the believers:

> *The unbelievers say of those who believe: 'If this [message] were any good, these people would not have preceded us in accepting it.' Since they refuse to be guided by it, they will always say, 'This is an ancient falsehood.'* (Verse 11)

Among the earliest Muslims were those who were poor and weak in Makkan society. To the arrogant elders of the Quraysh, this was a point of weakness. They boasted: 'had Islam been good, we would have been the first to recognize its goodness. Those others could not have preceded us in following it. Given our positions, knowledge and understanding, we are better equipped to determine what is good.'

Yet this was not so. What stopped them from accepting Islam was not any doubt that they had about it or that they did not recognize how good and sound it was, but rather the fact that they were too proud to follow Muḥammad's lead. They especially feared any loss of their social position or their economic privileges. Moreover they were proud of their ancestors and what they believed in. By contrast, those who were quick to respond to the call of Islam paid little attention to such considerations. Pride always prevents the arrogant from listening to the voice of sound nature; it precludes them from accepting the truth. Pride and arrogance always make people stubborn, urging them to seek hollow excuses and make false claims about the truth and its advocates. They will never acknowledge that they are wrong. Indeed, they put themselves at the centre of life, as if they were the pivot around which life itself turns: "*Since they refuse to be guided by it, they will always say, 'This is an ancient falsehood.'*" (Verse 11) Since they have not acknowledged the truth, then there must be something wrong with it. They could not make a mistake. They try to impress on the masses what they feel of their own infallibility!

The case for revelation concludes with a reference to Moses' scriptures:

> *Yet before this the book of Moses was revealed as a guide and a [sign of God's] grace. This book confirms it in the Arabic tongue, to warn the wrongdoers and to give good news to those who do good.* (Verse 12)

The Qur'ān repeatedly refers to its bond with earlier Divine books, particularly the one given to Moses, considering that the one given to Jesus was a complement to the Torah, which contains the basic faith and legislation. Hence, Moses' book is defined as '*a guide*', or *imām* in Arabic, and described as '*grace*'. Indeed, all Divine messages are signs of His grace bestowed on earth and its inhabitants, in every sense of

the word. It is grace and mercy extended throughout this life and in the life to come. This present book, the Qur'ān, "*confirms it in the Arabic tongue.*" It confirms the original source that forms the basis of all Divine religions and also the Divine code of life advocated by all religions. It confirms the true direction shown to humanity to ensure that it remains in contact with its Lord. The reference to its being in Arabic serves to remind the Arabs of God's favour in choosing them to be the bearers of His message to humanity and choosing their language for the Qur'ān. The verse also speaks of the nature and function of the message: "*To warn the wrongdoers and to give good news to those who do good.*" (Verse 12)

What Reward for Believers?

At the end of this first part, the *sūrah* describes the reward of those who do good, explaining the good news the Qur'ān gives them, making clear its necessary condition, which is acknowledgement of God's Lordship and its implementation in human life:

> *Those who say, 'Our Lord is God,' and follow the straight path shall have nothing to fear, nor shall they grieve. They are the ones destined for paradise where they shall abide as a reward for what they do.* (Verses 13–14)

What is required of them is that they say: '*Our Lord is God.*' These are not idle words; indeed, they represent more than belief. They embody a complete system that applies to every step, action and feeling in life. They set up a criterion to judge every thought, event, action, relation, bond and person. Our Lord is God: to Him do we address our worship, it is Him that we seek and it is on Him alone that we rely. Our Lord is God: no one else matters; all our hopes look up to Him, and we fear none but He. Our Lord is God: in every thought, judgement and action we seek His pleasure. Our Lord is God: His is the law we implement, and from Him alone we receive guidance. Our Lord is God: all our bonds with anyone or thing in the whole world are subject to our relation with Him.

"*And follow the straight path.*" (Verse 13) This is the next step that defines a straight line that we should follow with reassurance and steady feelings, entertaining neither doubts nor fears. Thus, actions and behaviour will always be in line with God's code, avoiding pitfalls and resisting all temptations.

So, the statement, '*Our Lord is God,*' outlines a system, and following this system after having consciously chosen it is a higher grade still. Those whom God guides to have both are indeed the best people. Hence, they "*shall have nothing to fear, nor shall they grieve.*" (Verse 13) Why would they fear anything or grieve over anything when they have a system that leads to God and following it is the best assurance to be with Him?

"*They are the ones destined for paradise where they shall abide as a reward for what they do.*" (Verse 14) The phrase '*for what they do*' explains the meaning of the statement, '*our Lord is God'* and diligent following of the system it outlines. It tells us that there is a type of action that earns the reward of abiding in heaven. It is the type of action that results from this particular system and its conscientious implementation. Thus we realize that the words and phrases of faith in Islam are not mere statements to be made verbally. The basic statement, 'I bear witness that there is no deity other than God', denotes a complete system. If it remains no more than a statement, it cannot be the cornerstone of Islam, as it always should be.

Millions of people repeat this declaration today, but it remains no more than words they utter. It produces no effect on their lives. They continue to lead a life based on a system that is akin to paganism while they repeat a declaration that for them remains hollow. To say, 'I bear witness that there is no deity other than God', or 'our Lord is God', is to denote a system of life. This must be clear in our minds so that we can identify this system and follow it.

2

Two Types of Offspring

We have enjoined upon man to show kindness to his parents: in pain did his mother bear him, and in pain did she give him birth. His bearing and weaning takes thirty months. And so, when he attains to full manhood and reaches the age of forty, he prays: 'My Lord! Grant me that I may be grateful for the blessings with which You have graced me and my parents, and that I may do good work that will meet with Your goodly acceptance. Grant me good descendants. To You I turn in repentance. I am indeed one of those who submit themselves to You.' (15)

وَوَصَّيْنَا ٱلْإِنسَٰنَ بِوَٰلِدَيْهِ إِحْسَٰنًا
حَمَلَتْهُ أُمُّهُۥ كُرْهًا وَوَضَعَتْهُ كُرْهًا
وَحَمْلُهُۥ وَفِصَٰلُهُۥ ثَلَٰثُونَ شَهْرًا
حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا بَلَغَ أَشُدَّهُۥ وَبَلَغَ أَرْبَعِينَ
سَنَةً قَالَ رَبِّ أَوْزِعْنِىٓ أَنْ أَشْكُرَ
نِعْمَتَكَ ٱلَّتِىٓ أَنْعَمْتَ عَلَىَّ وَعَلَىٰ
وَٰلِدَىَّ وَأَنْ أَعْمَلَ صَٰلِحًا تَرْضَىٰهُ
وَأَصْلِحْ لِى فِى ذُرِّيَّتِىٓ إِنِّى تُبْتُ
إِلَيْكَ وَإِنِّى مِنَ ٱلْمُسْلِمِينَ ﴿١٥﴾

It is from such people that We shall accept the best that they ever did, and whose bad deeds We shall overlook. [They shall be] among the people destined for paradise. True is the promise that has been given them. (16)

أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ ٱلَّذِينَ نَتَقَبَّلُ عَنْهُمْ أَحْسَنَ
مَا عَمِلُوا۟ وَنَتَجَاوَزُ عَن سَيِّـَٔاتِهِمْ فِىٓ
أَصْحَٰبِ ٱلْجَنَّةِ وَعْدَ ٱلصِّدْقِ ٱلَّذِى
كَانُوا۟ يُوعَدُونَ ﴿١٦﴾

وَالَّذِي قَالَ لِوَالِدَيْهِ أُفٍّ لَّكُمَا أَتَعِدَانِنِي أَنْ أُخْرَجَ وَقَدْ خَلَتِ الْقُرُونُ مِن قَبْلِي وَهُمَا يَسْتَغِيثَانِ اللَّهَ وَيْلَكَ آمِنْ إِنَّ وَعْدَ اللَّهِ حَقٌّ فَيَقُولُ مَا هَٰذَا إِلَّا أَسَاطِيرُ الْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿١٧﴾

But there is one who says to his parents: 'Fie on you both! Do you promise me that I shall be resurrected, when generations have passed away before me?' And while they both implore God for help, [and say to him]: 'Alas for you! Believe! God's promise always comes true,' he answers: 'All this is nothing but fables of ancient times.' (17)

أُولَٰئِكَ الَّذِينَ حَقَّ عَلَيْهِمُ الْقَوْلُ فِي أُمَمٍ قَدْ خَلَتْ مِن قَبْلِهِم مِّنَ الْجِنِّ وَالْإِنسِ إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا خَاسِرِينَ ﴿١٨﴾

Such are the ones upon whom the verdict is passed, together with other communities of *jinn* and humans that have passed away before their time. They will be utterly lost. (18)

وَلِكُلٍّ دَرَجَاتٌ مِّمَّا عَمِلُوا وَلِيُوَفِّيَهُمْ أَعْمَالَهُمْ وَهُمْ لَا يُظْلَمُونَ ﴿١٩﴾

They all shall have their grades in accordance with their deeds; and so, He will repay them in full for their doings, and none shall be wronged. (19)

وَيَوْمَ يُعْرَضُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا عَلَى النَّارِ أَذْهَبْتُمْ طَيِّبَاتِكُمْ فِي حَيَاتِكُمُ الدُّنْيَا وَاسْتَمْتَعْتُم بِهَا فَالْيَوْمَ تُجْزَوْنَ عَذَابَ الْهُونِ بِمَا كُنتُمْ تَسْتَكْبِرُونَ فِي الْأَرْضِ بِغَيْرِ الْحَقِّ وَبِمَا كُنتُمْ تَفْسُقُونَ ﴿٢٠﴾

On the Day when the unbelievers will be brought before the fire, they will be told: 'You have exhausted your share of good things in your worldly life and took your fill of pleasure. So, today you shall be required with the suffering of humiliation for having been arrogant on earth without any right, and for all your transgression.' (20)

Overview

In this part the *sūrah* speaks of human nature when it sticks to the right track and when it deviates, and at what end it arrives in either case. It begins by urging man to remain dutiful to his parents. This instruction often comes in the Qur'ān after it speaks about faith or in conjunction with such discourses. The reason for this is that the bond between children and parents is the strongest and most important after the bond of faith. It is the one that deserves to be honoured. Furthermore, grouping the two bonds together in this way in the Qur'ān makes it clear that the bond of faith takes precedence in human life. It is followed though by the family bond in its closest form.

This part of the *sūrah* gives us a scene portraying two types of human nature. In the first, the two bonds of faith and the one between parent and offspring work together in the same direction, seeking God's acceptance. In the second, the two bonds separate and have no meeting point. In the first case, the children concerned are given the good news of being admitted into heaven, while in the second, they are destined to suffer in hell. An image of the punishment meted out in hell is given, describing the end suffered by the arrogant who are guilty of transgression.

Dutiful to Parents

"*We have enjoined upon man to show kindness to his parents.*" (Verse 15) This is an order given to all mankind, based on the very fact of their being human with no need for any further qualification. They are all enjoined to show kindness in its absolute, unrestricted sense. Mere parenthood requires such absolute kindness. This order comes from the Creator of man, and it appears to apply to the human race in particular. It is unknown among birds, animals or insects for the young to take care of the old. What is clearly observed among these creatures is that by nature the old take care of the young. Nevertheless, this applies only to some species. Hence, the Divine order seems to apply only to man.

This instruction to be kind to one's parents is repeated several times in the Qur'ān and in the Prophet's pronouncements. By contrast,

kindness by parents to children occurs only rarely, addressing particular situations. Human nature itself ensures that parents take good care of their children, without the need for any other motivation. Parents often show a remarkable readiness to sacrifice whatever they have for their children, to the point of being willing to die for them. They show no hesitation in all this, seek no recompense, press no favour and expect no thanks. The new generation, however, rarely turns back to take care of the older one who had made such great sacrifices. Indeed, the younger generation moves forward to bring up another new generation and take care of it, making similar sacrifices in the process.

Islam considers the family the basic unit in its social structure. It is the nest where the young are reared, receiving their share of love, and learning the value of mutual cooperation and care. A child who does not have a family to look after it often suffers deprivation in some aspects of its life, even though all sorts of comfort remain available in its environment. The first thing such a child lacks as it grows up in an environment other than that of a family is love. It has been proven that by nature a child loves to have its mother's complete attention during its first two years of life. This cannot be provided in a non-family environment where one carer has to look after several children. In this situation, jealousy is bound to surface, and a grudging seed replaces that of love. Similarly, a child needs to be under one supervisory authority during a certain period of its life; this so that its character remains stable. Again, this cannot be provided anywhere other than the family environment. In a children's home, such an authority is lacking because supervisors work in shifts. Therefore, their charges can only but lack stability. Hence, we can see the wisdom behind making the family the basic unit of the Islamic social structure that meets all the needs of sound human nature.

The Qur'ān describes the mother's willing sacrifice, which cannot be compensated for by her children no matter how well they fulfil God's order to be kind to parents: "*in pain did his mother bear him, and in pain did she give him birth. His bearing and weaning takes thirty months.*" (Verse 15) Here the very words and their rhythm

gives us a clear sense of the difficulty and hard times the mother has to go through: "*in pain did his mother bear him, and in pain did she give him birth.*" In Arabic this sounds akin to a great sigh, made by someone bearing a heavy burden and breathing with difficulty. It, thus reflects the latter stages of pregnancy, as also of labour and birth.

As embryology advances, it reveals to us more and more of the great sacrifice the mother makes during pregnancy. When the egg is fertilized, it clings to the uterus. As it needs to feed, it begins to tear the tissues around it and feed on it. Blood runs to it so that the egg begins now to swim in a pool of the mother's blood, which is rich in nutrients. The egg needs more and more of this blood to grow and develop, and thus it continues to feed on the mother. This means that the mother eats food, digests it and as it enters her blood stream, this, with all its nutrients, feeds the developing embryo. When the embryo begins to develop its bones, it increasingly absorbs calcium from its mother who may suffer a shortage of the same. All this is merely a fraction of what the mother gives to the embryo.

Childbirth is another very difficult process, but its great pain dwindles before natural instinct. The mother is delighted with the fruit it yields, which means giving life to a new shoot of an old tree: a child that starts life as its mother moves on.

Now that the child is born, it needs to be breast-fed and taken much care of. By her milk, the mother gives of her own constitution, and as she takes care of her child, she gives much of her heart and feelings. Yet in giving all of this, she is nothing less than delighted. She is never fed up with all the trouble her child gives her. The best reward she aspires to is to see her child grow in good health. How can anyone compensate a mother for all her sacrifice? "One of the Prophet's Companions was carrying his mother as they did the *ṭawāf*, walking around the Ka'bah, [a ritual of pilgrimage]. He asked the Prophet: 'Have I discharged my duty to her?' The Prophet said: 'No, not even for one sigh she made.'" [Related by al-Bazzār.]

Having given this example of what parents, particularly the mother, do for their children, the *sūrah* now paints an image of a child that has attained maturity, nurturing sound nature and following right guidance:

> *And so, when he attains to full manhood and reaches the age of forty, he prays: 'My Lord! Grant me that I may be grateful for the blessings with which You have graced me and my parents, and that I may do good work that will meet with Your goodly acceptance. Grant me good descendants. To You I turn in repentance. I am indeed one of those who submit themselves to You.'* (Verse 15)

Here, the Arabic text uses the term *ashudd*, translated here as full manhood, which is between 30 and 40. Indeed at 40, man attains full maturity, when all talents and potentials are at their best and man tends to think and reflect in a relaxed atmosphere. Then, sound human nature begins to reflect on life and what comes after life, thinking of the eventual destiny.

The Qur'ān describes the thoughts and feelings of a person with sound nature as he stands at the end of one half of life and the beginning of another half with an almost apparent end. He, therefore, turns to God with this prayer: "*My Lord! Grant me that I may be grateful for the blessings with which You have graced me and my parents.*" (Verse 15) It is a prayer from a heart that appreciates the great grace God has bestowed on him, feeling that it is far more than he deserves. He recognizes that such grace was also bestowed in abundance on his parents. He feels that all his efforts are insufficient expression of gratitude for such grace. Therefore, he prays that God will enable him to perform his duty of thanksgiving and not allow his efforts to be wasted on distractions.

In this same prayer, the person who enjoys sound nature prays that God will enable him to "*do good work that will meet with Your goodly acceptance.*" What he wishes for is to be able to do some work that is so good as to meet with God's pleasure and acceptance. His utmost aim is to earn his Lord's acceptance, for it is in Him that he places all his hopes.

He goes on with his prayer: "*Grant me good descendants.*" This prayer issues from a believer's heart who hopes that his good work will continue with his children and their children and so on. He would love to be sure that his offspring will continue to worship God alone and seek His pleasure. Such goodly descendants are more precious to a believer than the greatest of material treasures. Such a prayer expresses a hope

that children take over from parents in obeying God across many generations.

What he presents in support of his sincere prayer is a request for repentance of any sins and errors and a statement of his full submission to God's will: "*To You I turn in repentance. I am indeed one of those who submit themselves to You.*"

Thus is the attitude of a good servant of God, one equipped with sound, uncorrupted nature. The Qur'ān tells us of how God looks upon such people:

> *It is from such people that We shall accept the best that they ever did, and whose bad deeds We shall overlook. [They shall be] among the people destined for paradise. True is the promise that has been given them.* (Verse 16)

The reward is granted on the basis of the best of one's deeds, while bad ones are overlooked. The destination to which such people go is heaven where they join its rightful dwellers. All this is in fulfilment of the true promise they were given in this present life. God's promise is always fulfilled.

To the Other Place

The converse of all this is error and transgression:

> *But there is one who says to his parents: 'Fie on you both! Do you promise me that I shall be resurrected, when generations have passed away before me?' And while they both implore God for help, [and say to him]: 'Alas for you! Believe! God's promise always comes true,' he answers: 'All this is nothing but fables of ancient times.' Such are the ones upon whom the verdict is passed, together with other communities of* jinn *and humans that have passed away before their time. They will be utterly lost.* (Verses 17–18)

The parents are believers, but the child is disobedient. His first characteristic is that of being undutiful to them, addressing them with arrogance and insolence, hurting their feelings: "*Fie on you both.*" He

then denies the resurrection, citing the hollow argument that no one from past generations has ever come back to life: "*Do you promise me that I shall be resurrected, when generations have passed away before me?*"(Verse 17) The time of resurrection is determined by God, when all will be resurrected at the same time after this present world has completed its term. No one has ever said that resurrection will take place in instalments, with one generation resurrected during the lifetime of a later one. It is not a game; rather, it is a submitting of final accounts once the journey has come to its final destination.

The parents are shocked by their son's words that mark him out to be a clear disbeliever. They fear the outcome of what he says to God and to them. Therefore, they appeal to him and pray to God for help: "*they both implore God for help, [and say to him]: 'Alas for you! Believe! God's promise always comes true.'*" (Verse 17) These words give us a clear impression of their dread at the outcome of all this. The child, for his part, however, persists with disbelief and denial, saying: "*All this is nothing but fables of ancient times.*" (Verse 17) His inevitable end overwhelms him: "*Such are the ones upon whom the verdict is passed, together with other communities of* jinn *and humans that have passed away before their time. They will be utterly lost.*" (Verse 18) The verdict passed on this person and others like him is the punishment incurred by unbelievers. There are large numbers of these across many generations of humans and *jinn*. God's promise which always comes true states that these '*will be utterly lost*'. What greater loss is there than the loss of faith in this life and the loss of God's pleasure in the life to come! Such a loss means inevitable suffering for such unbelievers.

Having given a general idea of the outcome that awaits the two groups, the *sūrah* gives us an image of the accurate accountability of every individual: "*They all shall have their grades in accordance with their deeds; and so, He will repay them in full for their doings, and none shall be wronged.*" (Verse 19) Every single one has their own grade, according to their deeds.

These two types of people are very common. Indeed, the description almost identifies two particular people to heighten the effect and make each mirror a life situation. There are reports suggesting that each example does refer to a particular case, but none of these carries any

degree of authenticity. It is better, therefore, to consider that they refer to two types rather than two individuals. This is endorsed by the way the *sūrah* comments on their situations. After describing the first type, the *sūrah* says: "*It is from such people that We shall accept the best that they ever did, and whose bad deeds We shall overlook. [They shall be] among the people destined for paradise. True is the promise that has been given them.*" (Verse 16) It refers to the second type with a similarly telling comment: "*Such are the ones upon whom the verdict is passed, together with other communities of* jinn *and humans that have passed away before their time. They will be utterly lost.*" (Verse 18) It finally comments on both types together: "*They all shall have their grades in accordance with their deeds; and so, He will repay them in full for their doings, and none shall be wronged.*" (Verse 19)

Submitting the Final Account

The *sūrah* then puts before the unbelievers their own fate as they face the reckoning on the Day of Resurrection which they were wont to deny:

> *On the Day when the unbelievers will be brought before the fire, they will be told: 'You have exhausted your share of good things in your worldly life and took your fill of pleasure. So, today you shall be requited with the suffering of humiliation for having been arrogant on earth without any right, and for all your transgression.'* (Verse 20)

This is a fast moving scene, yet it has a profound, telling effect. The scene brings them before the fire, but just before they are driven into it, they are told the reasons which determined their fate in this way: "*You have exhausted your share of good things in your worldly life and took your fill of pleasure.*" They had their fair share of good things, but they used them all up in the life of this world, keeping nothing back for their future life. In fact, they did not reckon that there would even be a future life. Therefore, they enjoyed these good things to the full, showing no gratitude for them and expressing no thanks to God for

granting them. They did not refrain from committing what is forbidden in order to enjoy such pleasures. Therefore, they had their full share of good things in this world, leaving themselves nothing in the life to come. They exchanged the endless life of the hereafter for the short span of life on earth. Therefore, "*today you shall be requited with the suffering of humiliation for having been arrogant on earth without any right, and for all your transgression.*" (Verse 20) Everyone who behaves with arrogance on earth does so without any right. All pride belongs to God; none belongs to any creature, no matter what position he holds. To suffer humiliation is, therefore, a just reward for arrogance and deviation from the path God has charted.

3

When Prophets Are Challenged

Remember that brother of the 'Ād who warned his people who lived in the Valley of the Sand Dunes. Other warners have come and gone both before and after him. He said: 'Worship none but God. I fear lest suffering befall you on a terrible day.' (21)

وَٱذْكُرْ أَخَا عَادٍ إِذْ أَنذَرَ قَوْمَهُۥ بِٱلْأَحْقَافِ
وَقَدْ خَلَتِ ٱلنُّذُرُ مِنۢ بَيْنِ يَدَيْهِ وَمِنْ
خَلْفِهِۦٓ أَلَّا تَعْبُدُوٓا۟ إِلَّا ٱللَّهَ إِنِّىٓ أَخَافُ
عَلَيْكُمْ عَذَابَ يَوْمٍ عَظِيمٍ ﴿٢١﴾

They said to him: 'Have you come to turn us away from our gods? Bring, then, upon us that with which you threaten us, if what you say is true.' (22)

قَالُوٓا۟ أَجِئْتَنَا لِتَأْفِكَنَا عَنْ ءَالِهَتِنَا فَأْتِنَا
بِمَا تَعِدُنَآ إِن كُنتَ مِنَ ٱلصَّٰدِقِينَ ﴿٢٢﴾

He said: 'Only God knows when it will come. I only convey to you the message I am entrusted with; but I see that you are insolent people.' (23)

قَالَ إِنَّمَا ٱلْعِلْمُ عِندَ ٱللَّهِ وَأُبَلِّغُكُم مَّآ أُرْسِلْتُ
بِهِۦ وَلَٰكِنِّىٓ أَرَىٰكُمْ قَوْمًا تَجْهَلُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

When they saw a cloud approaching their valleys, they said: 'This cloud will bring us rain.' 'No, indeed. It is the very thing you wanted to hasten: a stormwind bearing painful suffering (24)

فَلَمَّا رَأَوْهُ عَارِضًا مُّسْتَقْبِلَ أَوْدِيَتِهِمْ قَالُوا۟
هَٰذَا عَارِضٌ مُّمْطِرُنَا ۚ بَلْ هُوَ مَا ٱسْتَعْجَلْتُم
بِهِۦ ۖ رِيحٌ فِيهَا عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ﴿٢٤﴾

تُدَمِّرُ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ بِأَمْرِ رَبِّهَا فَأَصْبَحُوا
لَا يُرَىٰٓ إِلَّا مَسَٰكِنُهُمْ كَذَٰلِكَ نَجْزِي
ٱلْقَوْمَ ٱلْمُجْرِمِينَ ﴿٢٥﴾

which will destroy everything by the command of its Lord.' When the morning came, there was nothing to see of them except their ruined dwellings. Thus do We requite guilty people. (25)

وَلَقَدْ مَكَّنَّٰهُمْ فِيمَآ إِن مَّكَّنَّٰكُمْ فِيهِ
وَجَعَلْنَا لَهُمْ سَمْعًا وَأَبْصَٰرًا وَأَفْـِٔدَةً فَمَآ
أَغْنَىٰ عَنْهُمْ سَمْعُهُمْ وَلَآ أَبْصَٰرُهُمْ وَلَآ
أَفْـِٔدَتُهُم مِّن شَيْءٍ إِذْ كَانُوا يَجْحَدُونَ
بِـَٔايَٰتِ ٱللَّهِ وَحَاقَ بِهِم مَّا كَانُوا بِهِۦ
يَسْتَهْزِءُونَ ﴿٢٦﴾

We had securely established them in a manner in which We have never established you; and We had endowed them with hearing, and sight, and hearts. Yet nothing did their hearing, sight and hearts avail them since they persisted in denying God's revelations. They were overwhelmed by the very thing which they had mocked. (26)

وَلَقَدْ أَهْلَكْنَا مَا حَوْلَكُم مِّنَ ٱلْقُرَىٰ
وَصَرَّفْنَا ٱلْـَٔايَٰتِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَرْجِعُونَ ﴿٢٧﴾

We have also destroyed other communities that once lived around you, and We gave Our message in various ways so that they might return to the right way. (27)

فَلَوْلَا نَصَرَهُمُ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱتَّخَذُوا مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ
قُرْبَانًا ءَالِهَةً بَلْ ضَلُّوا عَنْهُمْ وَذَٰلِكَ
إِفْكُهُمْ وَمَا كَانُوا يَفْتَرُونَ ﴿٢٨﴾

Why did those whom they had set up as deities beside God, hoping that they would bring them nearer to Him, give them no help? Indeed, they utterly failed them. Such were their lies and such their false inventions. (28)

Overview

This third part of the *sūrah* addresses its central question in a different way to that of its earlier parts. It speaks of the fate of the 'Ād and other townships around Makkah. Towards Hūd, their brother, whom God sent as His messenger, they adopted a similar attitude to that of the idolaters in Makkah towards Muḥammad, their brother and God's messenger. Both raised the same objections. Hūd answered them in the splendid manner of prophets, but within the limits of his human ability and the mission assigned to him. When they paid no heed to his warnings, they were smitten by God's punishment that left them utterly destroyed. Although they were more powerful, wealthy and intelligent than the Makkan unbelievers, none of this was of any avail to them. Nor did their alleged deities, which they claimed would bring them closer to God, avail them of anything.

The Makkan unbelievers are also reminded of the fate their own ancestors met, given they too had adopted the same attitude. They are told in no uncertain terms that they will suffer the same fate. The *sūrah* also shows them the line the Divine message follows: it is consistent and unchanging. Likewise, God's law applies to all and does not change. We see the tree of faith with firm roots, its branches stretched wide across the generations. It is the same faith for all times and communities.

At the Sand Dunes

> *Remember that brother of the 'Ād who warned his people who lived in the Valley of the Sand Dunes. Other warners have come and gone both before and after him. He said: 'Worship none but God. I fear lest suffering befall you on a terrible day.'* (Verse 21)

The brother of the 'Ād is the Prophet Hūd (peace be upon him) who is mentioned here by his position as a brother to his people. This highlights the relation of mutual love and care that existed between him and his people, which should have made them more responsive to his call and motivated them to think well of him and what he taught. The same bond existed between Muḥammad (peace be upon him) and his people who similarly opposed him.

The 'Ād used to build their homes on the high sand dunes in a valley in the south of the Arabian Peninsula, said to be near Ḥadramawt.[1] God in His glory directs His messenger to remember Hūd and how he warned his people at the Valley of the Sand Dunes. This to give him encouragement as he realizes that Hūd was similarly rejected by his people. Such remembrance also serves to remind the Makkan unbelievers of the fate of those earlier communities that rejected God's messages.

Hūd warned his people, but he was not the first messenger to warn his community. Other messengers did the same before him: "*Other warners have come and gone both before and after him.*" Those messengers came close to him in time and place as also far from him. The chain of God's messages is a continuous one, and the warnings are given at all times. This whole issue is familiar to all. Hūd gave them the same warnings given by all messengers to their communities: "*Worship none but God. I fear lest suffering befall you on a terrible day.*" (Verse 21) Worshipping God means faith at heart and a code of living. To discard all this inevitably leads to terrible suffering in this present life, or in the life to come, or in both. When reference is made to a day, as it is made here, it means the Day of Judgement when the suffering is far greater and more terrible.

What response did Hūd's people give him for his caring instructions and warnings? "*They said to him: 'Have you come to turn us away from our gods? Bring, then, upon us that with which you threaten us, if what you say is true.'*" (Verse 22) Their response betrays mistrust, lack of understanding, rejection of the warning, hastening the punishment he warned them against, arrogance and a persistent adherence to false beliefs.

For his part, Hūd receives all this with patience, showing the manners that behove a prophet. He makes no personal claims as he outlines his attitude and makes his limits clear to them: "*He said: 'Only God knows when it will come. I only convey to you the message I am entrusted with; but I see that you are insolent people.'*" (Verse 23) I am giving you this

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1. Recent reports based on satellite pictures suggest that a whole city is buried at a place close to Oman in the Empty Quarter, which means that it is to the west of Ḥadramout, a large province in Yemen. From the description given, this city might well be where the 'Ād lived. – Editor's note.

warning as I was commanded to do, but I do not know when such punishment falls, or what form it will take. All this is known to God alone. I am only delivering a message entrusted to me, making no further claim. "*But I see that you are insolent people.*" (Verse 23) What could be more foolish and insolent than to give such a hostile reception to a brother who is only offering sincere and honest advice?

The *sūrah* gives no further details of the long argument that took place between Hūd and his people, moving straight to report on the fate they suffered. This is intended here as a reply to their challenge and hastening of punishment:

> *When they saw a cloud approaching their valleys, they said: 'This cloud will bring us rain.' 'No, indeed. It is the very thing you wanted to hasten: a stormwind bearing painful suffering which will destroy everything by the command of its Lord.' When the morning came, there was nothing to see of them except their ruined dwellings. Thus do We requite guilty people.* (Verses 24–25)

Reports suggest that the 'Ād suffered a period of intense heat, coupled with absence of rain. They endured this unbearable climate for some time. Then God sent them clouds, and they were delighted. They went into the surrounding valleys hoping that rain would quickly ensue. Yet the truth of what the clouds brought signified their ultimate demise: "*No, indeed. It is the very thing you wanted to hasten: a stormwind bearing painful suffering which will destroy everything by the command of its Lord.*" Elsewhere in the Qur'ān, this stormwind is described as "*furiously raging.*" (69: 6) Another description of it states that it "*spared nothing of what it came upon, but caused it all to become like bones dead and decayed.*" (51: 42)

The Qur'ānic text depicts the wind as if it was alive, aware of what it was doing, fulfilling its orders to destroy everything in its wake: "*which will destroy everything by the command of its Lord.*" This is a universal fact which the Qur'ān is wont to impress on people. This universe is alive, and every force in it is aware of what God wants of it, proceeding to fulfil it. Man is one of these forces. When he is a true believer, his heart becomes open to greater knowledge and he becomes

able to understand more of the universal forces around him and respond to them. This opens the way to a mutual response that differs from what people generally know of life and understanding. Everything around us has life, but we do not appreciate this because shapes and forms limit our understanding. The universe around us is full of secrets which are appreciated by faculties of understanding, even though they cannot be seen by our eyes.

The stormwind fulfilled the task assigned to it, destroying everything. Thus, "*when the morning came, there was nothing to see of them except their ruined dwellings.*" (Verse 25) No trace of the 'Ād was left behind, not even their animals or belongings. Everything disappeared. All that was left were desolate dwellings, empty, lacking all signs of life: "*Thus do We requite guilty people.*" (Verse 25) This rule applies to all guilty people.

Useless Power

With this image of death and destruction, the *sūrah* addresses the present generation who follow in the 'Ād's footsteps, giving them a telling reminder:

> *We had securely established them in a manner in which We have never established you; and We had endowed them with hearing, and sight, and hearts. Yet nothing did their hearing, sight and hearts avail them since they persisted in denying God's revelations. They were overwhelmed by the very thing which they had mocked.* (Verse 26)

Those very people who were destroyed by the stormwind had once been established in the land in a way that had not been granted to the Arabs of Makkah. This is a general reference to what they had been given of power, wealth, knowledge and life's luxuries. They were also endowed with sharp faculties of hearing and sight, as well as hearts. The Qur'ān uses different ways of referring to the faculty of understanding, citing it alternatively as heart, mind or brain, when all refer to the same ability. Yet none of these faculties was of any use as the 'Ād rendered them useless when "*they persisted in denying God's*

revelations." (Verse 26) Denying God's revelations suppresses senses and faculties and screens them from His source of light and understanding, blunting them altogether. "*They were overwhelmed by the very thing which they had mocked.* (Verse 26) This refers to the punishment they were warned about and which they derided.

The lesson to be drawn here is that no one should ever be too proud of his power, wealth or knowledge, thinking that these can afford him absolute protection. We see in what happened to the 'Ād a natural power being used against people, destroying them and all that they enjoyed. Nothing was left of them except their empty and desolate dwellings.

Winds are a universal power operating all the time in accordance with the system God has placed in the universe. He may use them to destroy certain places as part of His overall scheme of things. There is no need, then, within this context, to upset or disrupt the universal system, as some people mistakenly suggest. The One who has put the system in place is the One who has determined the fates of individuals and communities. Every single thing, event, movement and person are taken into account within the overall system and the operation of His law. Like all other universal powers, winds are controlled by God, fulfilling the role He has assigned to them and to the universe. The same applies to humans at whose disposal God has placed certain universal powers. When people undertake something, they are in fact fulfilling the role assigned to them by God, for His purpose. Their freedom of action and choice is part of the overall law that ensures universal harmony. Indeed everything is set according to a fine measure, with nothing falling short or causing disruption.

This part of the *sūrah* concludes by drawing people's attention to the lessons learnt from the fates suffered by the communities in the areas not far from around Makkah:

> *We have also destroyed other communities that once lived around you, and We gave Our message in various ways so that they might return to the right way. Why did those whom they had set up as deities beside God, hoping that they would bring them nearer to Him, give them no help? Indeed, they utterly failed them. Such were their lies and such their false inventions.* (Verses 27–28)

God destroyed the communities who rejected the messengers sent to them, such as the 'Ād in the Valley of the Sand Dunes in the south of Arabia, the Thamūd at Ḥijr in the north, the people of Sheba in Yemen, the Madyan whose former homes the Makkans passed on their way to Syria and the people of Lot whose dwellings were along the route the Arabs took on their summer journey to the north. God gave His message to these people in different ways so as to give such erring communities a chance to repent and change their ways. They, however, persisted with their errors and so incurred God's punishment, which was inflicted on them in various ways. What happened to them was so serious that it became part of the history one generation reports to the next. The idolaters in Makkah were aware of this, given they passed by these areas on their travels.

Their attentions are thus drawn to the real facts. God destroyed the unbelievers before them while their deities, whom they claimed drew them nearer to God, were utterly unable to save them: "*Why did those whom they had set up as deities beside God, hoping that they would bring them nearer to Him, give them no help?*" (Verse 28) They could not furnish them with any support. "*Indeed, they utterly failed them.*" They left them to their fate. Indeed, they did not know how to reach them, let alone spare them God's punishment. "*Such were their lies and such their false inventions.* (Verse 28) All their claims about so-called deities are lies and fabrications. These too will inevitably be destroyed. What end, then, did those Arabs who took false deities for themselves expect?

4

Jinn Listening to the Qur'ān

We sent to you a group of *jinn* to listen to the Qur'ān. When they heard it, they said to one another, 'Listen in silence!' When the recitation ended, they returned to their people to warn them. (29)

وَإِذْ صَرَفْنَآ إِلَيْكَ نَفَرًا مِّنَ ٱلْجِنِّ يَسْتَمِعُونَ
ٱلْقُرْءَانَ فَلَمَّا حَضَرُوهُ قَالُوٓا۟ أَنصِتُوا۟ ۖ فَلَمَّا
قُضِىَ وَلَّوْا۟ إِلَىٰ قَوْمِهِم مُّنذِرِينَ ﴿٢٩﴾

'Our people,' they said, 'we have been listening to revelation bestowed from on high after Moses, confirming what came before it. It guides to the truth and to a straight path. (30)

قَالُوا۟ يَٰقَوْمَنَآ إِنَّا سَمِعْنَا كِتَٰبًا
أُنزِلَ مِنۢ بَعْدِ مُوسَىٰ مُصَدِّقًا لِّمَا بَيْنَ
يَدَيْهِ يَهْدِىٓ إِلَى ٱلْحَقِّ وَإِلَىٰ طَرِيقٍ
مُّسْتَقِيمٍ ﴿٣٠﴾

'Our people! Respond to God's call and have faith in Him. He will forgive you your sins and deliver you from grievous suffering. (31)

يَٰقَوْمَنَآ أَجِيبُوا۟ دَاعِىَ ٱللَّهِ وَءَامِنُوا۟ بِهِۦ
يَغْفِرْ لَكُم مِّن ذُنُوبِكُمْ وَيُجِرْكُم
مِّنْ عَذَابٍ أَلِيمٍ ﴿٣١﴾

'He who does not respond to God's call cannot elude Him on earth, nor will they have any protector against Him. They are indeed in manifest error.' (32)

وَمَن لَّا يُجِبْ دَاعِىَ ٱللَّهِ فَلَيْسَ بِمُعْجِزٍ
فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ وَلَيْسَ لَهُۥ مِن دُونِهِۦٓ أَوْلِيَآءُ ۚ
أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ فِى ضَلَٰلٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٣٢﴾

أَوَلَمْ يَرَوْا أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ ٱلَّذِى خَلَقَ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضَ وَلَمْ يَعْىَ بِخَلْقِهِنَّ بِقَٰدِرٍ عَلَىٰٓ أَن يُحْۦِىَ ٱلْمَوْتَىٰ ۚ بَلَىٰٓ إِنَّهُۥ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَىْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ﴿٣٣﴾

Are they not aware that God, who has created the heavens and the earth and was not wearied by their creation, has the power to bring the dead back to life? Yes, indeed. He has power over all things. (33)

وَيَوْمَ يُعْرَضُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ عَلَى ٱلنَّارِ أَلَيْسَ هَٰذَا بِٱلْحَقِّ ۖ قَالُوا۟ بَلَىٰ وَرَبِّنَا ۚ قَالَ فَذُوقُوا۟ ٱلْعَذَابَ بِمَا كُنتُمْ تَكْفُرُونَ ﴿٣٤﴾

On the Day when the unbelievers will be brought before the fire, [they will be asked]: 'Is this not the truth?' They will answer: 'Yes, by our Lord.' He will say: 'Taste, then, this suffering, for you were unbelievers.' (34)

فَٱصْبِرْ كَمَا صَبَرَ أُو۟لُوا۟ ٱلْعَزْمِ مِنَ ٱلرُّسُلِ وَلَا تَسْتَعْجِل لَّهُمْ ۚ كَأَنَّهُمْ يَوْمَ يَرَوْنَ مَا يُوعَدُونَ لَمْ يَلْبَثُوٓا۟ إِلَّا سَاعَةً مِّن نَّهَارٍۭ ۚ بَلَٰغٌ ۚ فَهَلْ يُهْلَكُ إِلَّا ٱلْقَوْمُ ٱلْفَٰسِقُونَ ﴿٣٥﴾

Remain, then, patient in adversity, just as all messengers endowed with firm resolve bore themselves with patience. Do not seek to hasten their punishment. On the Day when they see what they were promised, it will seem to them as though they had dwelt [on earth] no more than an hour in a single day. This has been made clear. Will, then, any be destroyed except the evildoers? (35)

Overview

This last part of the *sūrah* presents a different way of tackling the basic question of faith. It tells us the story of a group of *jinn* who heard the Qur'ān being recited and who listened to it. They felt, at heart, that it was the word of truth and believed in it instantly. They then rushed to their own people calling on them to believe, giving

them the good news of earning forgiveness for their past sins and warning them against turning away and persisting in error. The effect of the Qur'ān on this group of *jinn* is clearly indicated in their advice to each other to hearken to its recitation, as well as the report they gave to their people about it, urging them to believe too. Reporting the story in this way should touch the hearts of human beings to whom the message of the Qur'ān is firstly addressed. It should have a telling and profound effect on them. At the same time, a reference to the link between the book given to Moses and the Qur'ān is mentioned by the *jinn*. This is a fact ignored by humans but highlighted by the *jinn*. Again this has a profound effect which is consistent with the message of the *sūrah*.

The *jinn*'s discourse also refers to the open book of the universe, testifying to God's great power manifested in the creation of the heavens and the earth and His ability to bring the dead back to life. Needless to say, people argue endlessly about this, often denying it altogether.

In the context of resurrection, the *sūrah* portrays a scene from the Day of Judgement speaking of the time when the unbelievers are brought before the fire of hell. Finally, the Prophet is instructed to remain patient in adversity and not to hasten their punishment. Rather, he should leave them to live their lives until the appointed time, which is bound to come soon, in no more than an hour of a day, during which the message is given.

The *Jinn* Listening to the Qur'ān

> *We sent to you a group of* jinn *to listen to the Qur'ān. When they heard it, they said to one another, 'Listen in silence!' When the recitation ended, they returned to their people to warn them. 'Our people,' they said, 'we have been listening to revelation bestowed from on high after Moses, confirming what came before it. It guides to the truth and to a straight path. Our people! Respond to God's call and have faith in Him. He will forgive you your sins and deliver you from grievous suffering. He who does not respond to God's call cannot elude Him on earth, nor will they have any protector against Him. They are indeed in manifest error. Are they not aware that*

> *God, who has created the heavens and the earth and was not wearied by their creation, has the power to bring the dead back to life? Yes, indeed. He has power over all things.* (Verses 29–33)

Those *jinn* who listened to the Qur'ān in silence made a comment that embraced faith in its entirety: belief in God's revelation; the unity of the message given in the Torah and the Qur'ān; acknowledging the truth to which the Qur'ān guides; belief in the Day of Resurrection and which actions earn forgiveness and which incur punishment; acknowledging God's power of creation and His overall authority over all creatures, and recognizing the link between creation in the first place and bringing the dead back to life. These are the principles the *sūrah* discusses from start to finish. They are presented here by the *jinn*, in a voice that comes from beyond man's world.

The fact that the Qur'ān mentions how a number of *jinn* were sent to listen to the Qur'ān as the Prophet recited it, and reports what they did and said afterwards, is sufficient to confirm the existence of the *jinn* and the event related. It further confirms that they were able to listen to the Qur'ān in its Arabic wording as pronounced by the Prophet. It also makes clear that the *jinn* are able to accept faith or deny it, that they have the choice to follow guidance or continue in error. There is no need for any further confirmation. No person can add anything to the reliability of a fact stated by God in the Qur'ān. We, however, merely try to clarify it in our human perception.

The universe around us is full of secrets, as well as powers and creatures of which we know nothing: neither their nature, nor their shape, form or effect. We live in the midst of all these powers and secrets and every day discover some of these getting to know some of such creatures or their qualities and how they make their effect on the world around us. We are still, however, at the beginning of the road, leading to knowledge of the universe. We should bear in mind that all past generations of mankind, the present one and all future generations dwell on no more than a small particle in the vast universe, which is planet earth. When compared to human knowledge five centuries ago, what we now know when we are still just at the beginning of the road is considered stranger by far than the remarkable creatures known as

the *jinn*. Had someone told people five centuries ago anything about atomic energy, they would have considered him crazy, or at least considered his views far stranger than the *jinn*.

The secrets we discover and the knowledge we acquire remain within the limits of our human power, which is granted to us so that we can discharge our task of building life on earth, in accordance with the terms of reference set for us by God. Moreover, what we learn remains within what God has made available or subservient to us for use in fulfilment of our task. No matter how long human life on earth extends, human knowledge and discoveries will remain within this framework; i.e. the framework of what we need for the mission assigned to us when we were placed in charge of the earth, according to God's purpose and wisdom. We will discover and learn much more of the wonderful secrets and powers in the universe, compared to which the secrets of the atom may appear like child's play, but we will remain within the limited area of knowledge assigned to man. We will remain within the limits of the Qur'ānic statement: "*You, [mankind], have been granted but little knowledge.*" (17: 85) It remains little compared to what the universe contains of secrets and facts known only to its Creator who controls all. We need to contrast this against God's representation of His limitless knowledge: "*Were all the trees on earth to be made into pens, and the sea ink, with seven more seas yet added to it, the words of God would not be exhausted.*" (31: 27)

Therefore, we cannot say that something belonging to the realm that lies beyond our perception, or some secret or power in the universe, certainly exists or not, or is possible or impossible, merely because it is beyond our familiar world or our human experience. We have not yet discovered all the secrets of our own physical constitution, its systems and potentials, let alone the secrets of our minds and spirits.

There may be secrets that are beyond what is meant to be revealed to us, and secrets that we are not meant to understand, even though we get to learn about their qualities or effects, or even only their existence. What is withheld from us will not, should we learn about it, benefit us in the fulfilment of our assignment on earth. Therefore, when God tells us in His words, not through our experience and acquired knowledge, about these secrets and powers, we should accept

His gift with gratitude and take it as He gives it to us, adding nothing and omitting nothing. Such knowledge comes to us directly from God, and He has chosen to give it to us in a particular measure. There is simply no other source to give us more.

On the basis of the account given in this *sūrah* and that given in *Sūrah* 72, The *Jinn*, (which most probably speaks of the same event), and from other references to the *jinn* in the Qur'ān as well as authentic *aḥādīth* referring to this event, we can understand certain facts about the *jinn*. We will add nothing further.

To sum up these facts we say that there is a type of God's creation named the *jinn*, which is created out of fire. This is evidenced by the Qur'ānic reports of *Iblīs*'s statement in reference to Adam: "*I am nobler than he: You created me out of fire, while You created him out of clay.*" (7: 12) *Iblīs*, or Satan, belongs to the *jinn*, as God says: "*When We said to the angels: 'Prostrate yourselves before Adam,' they all prostrated themselves. Not so* Iblīs, *who belonged to the* jinn *and he disobeyed his Lord's command.*" (18: 50) This type of creation has different qualities to those of humans. One of these is that it is created out of fire, and another is that the *jinn* can see humans while humans cannot see them. In reference to *Iblīs*, who belongs to the *jinn*, God says: "*Surely, he and his tribe watch you from where you cannot perceive them.*" (7: 27) This last statement also tells us that the *jinn* have their own groupings and communities, which are similar to human communities.

The *jinn* can live on earth, although we do not know where. When He turned them out of heaven, God said to both Adam and *Iblīs*: "*Get you down. You shall be enemies to one another. On earth you shall have an abode and sustenance, for a while.*" (2: 36) The *jinn* who were made subservient to Solomon performed for him certain works on land which, by necessity, meant that they had whatever was necessary for them to live on earth. Likewise, they can live and survive away from this planet. The Qur'ān reports a statement made by some of the *jinn* which says: "*We ascended to high heaven and found it filled with mighty guards and flames. We used to sit eavesdropping, but now eavesdroppers find flames lying in wait for them.*" (72: 8–9)

The *jinn* can also influence the understanding of humans, and they are given leave to lead such humans as go astray, but not those who are

God's true servants. In the Qur'ānic account of the exchange between God and *Iblīs*, the latter said: "*I swear by Your very might: I shall certainly tempt them all except Your true servants.*" (38: 82–83) Other texts also confirm this, but we do not know how the *jinn* whisper to humans and influence them, nor what tools they use in the process. They can hear man and understand his language. This is clearly the case when this group of *jinn* listened to the Qur'ān, understood it and were influenced by it. Like humans, the *jinn* can follow Divine guidance or go astray. As reported in *Sūrah* 72, this group of *jinn* said: "*Some of us surrender themselves to God and some are wrongdoers. Those that surrender themselves have attained to consciousness of what is right; whereas the wrongdoers are indeed the fuel of hell.*" (72: 14–15) Moreover, those of them who listened to the Qur'ān went straight to their people and called on them to accept the message of Islam, having themselves accepted it and learnt what their people had not yet learnt.

This is all that we can say with certainty about the *jinn*. We should not add to it anything that lacks supporting evidence. The event to which the present verses of the *sūrah* refer, as does, in all probability, *Sūrah* 72, The *Jinn*, is confirmed by several reports. Here, we will quote the most authentic of these.

"Ibn 'Abbās said: The Prophet neither recited anything to the *jinn*, nor did he see them. The Prophet went with a number of his Companions aiming for the 'Ukāẓ Market. By that time, the *jinn* were blocked from eavesdropping in the skies and flames were set against them. When they went to their people, they told them of the situation. Some of them said: 'You have been stopped from eavesdropping for something that must have taken place. Travel, therefore, throughout the earth and try to find out what has happened to cause this.' Groups of them travelled in every direction, searching for the cause that blocked them from eavesdropping. The company that went to Tihāmah drew close to the Prophet as he was at the Nakhlah Valley, aiming for 'Ukāẓ Market. He was leading the dawn prayer, with his Companions in the congregation. They listened to him reciting the Qur'ān in his prayer. Then they said to one another: 'This is indeed what blocked you from eavesdropping in the skies.' They then went to their people and said to them: '*We have heard a*

wondrous discourse, guiding towards consciousness of what is right, and so we have come to believe in it.' (72: 1–2) God subsequently revealed this *sūrah* to the Prophet which included what the *jinn* said." [Related by Aḥmad, al-Bukhārī, Muslim and others.]

Ibn Mas'ūd was asked whether any of the Prophet's Companions was with him on the night when the *jinn* listened to the Qur'ān. He replied: "None of us accompanied him. We were with him one night when we missed him. We looked for him in the nearby valleys and paths. When we did not find him we thought that he might have been carried away or assassinated. Ours was an extremely terrible night then. In the morning we saw him coming towards us from the direction of Ḥirā'. We said to him: 'messenger of God! We missed you and searched for you. When we could not find you we had a terrible night.' He said: 'Someone came to me with a call from the *jinn*, and I went with him and read the Qur'ān to them.' He then took us to show us their traces and where they had their fires. They asked him for food and he said to them: 'You may have the bones of all animals at the slaughter of which God's name is invoked. When you hold a bone in your hand, it will be to you as though it has all the meat it can carry. Every dropping serves as fodder for your cattle.' The Prophet said to us: 'Do not, then, use these to clean yourself when you go to do stools.'" [Related by Muslim, Abū Dāwūd and al-Tirmidhī.]

In his biography of the Prophet, Ibn Isḥāq narrates the *jinn* story after the Prophet's journey to Ṭā'if where he went to visit the Thaqīf tribe, seeking their support to deliver his message. By that time, Abū Ṭālib, his uncle who had provided him with protection against attack had died and the Prophet was now subjected to much harm and hostility. The Thaqīf, however, answered him very rudely and set their young lads and servants against him. In this way, the Prophet was stoned to the extent that both his feet bled. At this point, he prayed to God, making the following passionate appeal:

> To You, My Lord, I complain of my weakness, lack of support and the humiliation I am made to receive.
>
> Most compassionate and merciful! You are the Lord of the weak, and You are my Lord. To whom do You leave me? To a

> distant person who receives me with hostility? Or to an enemy to whom You have given power over me?
>
> If You are not displeased with me, I do not care what I face. I would, however, be much happier with Your mercy.
>
> I seek refuge in the light of Your face by which all darkness is dispelled and both this life and the life to come are put on their right courses against incurring Your wrath or being the subject of Your anger. To You I submit, until I earn Your pleasure. Everything is powerless without Your support.[2]

After his account of the Prophet's trip to Ṭā'if, Ibn Isḥāq adds: "When the Prophet gave up hope of any positive response from the Thaqīf, he returned to Makkah. When he was at the valley of Nakhlah, he rose up in the middle of the night to pray. It was then that the group of *jinn* God mentioned in the Qur'ān came to him. They were, as I was told, seven in number and came from among the *jinn* of Nuṣaybīn. They listened to his recitation. When he finished his prayer, they went straight to their people to warn them, having believed in Islam and the Qur'ān. God then related what happened to the Prophet in verses 29–32 of *Sūrah* 46, The Sand Dunes, and also in *Sūrah* 72, The *Jinn*."

Ibn Kathīr comments on this last report by Ibn Isḥāq, saying: "This is correct, but the time at which Ibn Isḥāq says it occurred is questionable. The *jinn* listened to the Qur'ān in the early days of its revelation, as indicated by the *ḥadīth* reported by Ibn 'Abbās, while the Prophet went on his journey to Ṭā'if after his uncle's death, which means only one or two years before the Prophet's migration to Madīnah, as indicated by Ibn Isḥāq himself and others. However, God knows best."

There are many other reports concerning this event. From all these, we rely on the first by Ibn 'Abbās, mentioned above, because it is the one that fits most perfectly with the Qur'ānic texts speaking about the event. Moreover, it clearly states that the Prophet learnt of what took place through what was revealed to him and that he neither saw nor

2. The story is given in detail in: Salahi, Adil, *Muhammad: Man and Prophet*, The Islamic Foundation, Leicester, 2002, pp. 178–182. – Editor's note.

felt the presence of the *jinn*. Moreover, this *ḥadīth* is the most authentic of all these reports, having the most reliable chain of transmission. As to the point that the Prophet learnt of the event through the Qur'ān, Ibn Isḥāq's version agrees with this. It is further supported by what the Qur'ān mentions about the *jinn* being able to see us but not the reverse: "*Surely, he and his tribe watch you from where you cannot perceive them.*" (7: 27)

A Telling Warning

> *We sent to you a group of* jinn *to listen to the Qur'ān. When they heard it, they said to one another, 'Listen in silence!' When the recitation ended, they returned to their people to warn them.* (Verse 29)

It was, then, a purposeful act of God's that He sent this group of *jinn* to listen to the Qur'ān; in other words, it was not mere coincidence. God wanted the *jinn* to know about His final message, just as they had earlier learnt about Moses' message. According to His design, some of them will then believe and spare themselves punishment in hell, which is the abode of unbelievers whether *jinn* or humans.

The *sūrah* draws before our eyes an image of this group, between three and ten *jinn*, as they listened to the Qur'ān. It paints for us their feelings as it was being recited: an overwhelming awe leading to submission and action. "*When they heard it, they said to one another, 'Listen in silence!'*" This short sentence gives a clear impression of their attitude as they hearkened to the Qur'ānic recitation. Then, "*When the recitation ended, they returned to their people to warn them.*" (Verse 29) This sentence confirms the effect the Qur'ān had on them. They listened in complete silence, attentions focused throughout the recitation. When it was over, they returned at speed to their own people. They felt that what they had heard must be immediately told and passed on. Their people needed to know so that they could be warned. It is a situation where one is highly influenced by something which motivates him to immediate action that seeks to spread the benefit and to get others to adopt the same serious attitude: "*Our people, they said, we have been listening to revelation bestowed from on high after*

Moses, confirming what came before it. It guides to the truth and to a straight path." (Verse 30)

The first thing they said to their people was that the revelation they had heard had been bestowed from on high after the book of Moses and that it confirmed the scriptures before it. Thus, they knew about Moses' book and recognized, once they heard the Qur'ān, that it was closely related to the Torah. What they heard of the Qur'ān might not have mentioned Moses or his book, but its very nature suggested that it came from the same source. This acknowledgement by the *jinn*, who are relatively unaffected by factors that operate in human life, has a clear and profound import.

They give expression to their feelings as they listened to the Qur'ān: "*It guides to the truth and to a straight path.*" (Verse 30) The truth and the guidance provided by the Qur'ān have a profound effect on people. Only a sealed heart and an arrogant, stubborn soul, motivated by selfish interests, will resist it. Hence, it had an immediate and telling effect on the hearts of those *jinn*, prompting them to give this testimony of its truth. They proceeded with their warning to their people, full of enthusiasm and expressing their firm conviction of the truth they had learnt. In other words, this recitation of the Qur'ān placed a duty on them to inform and warn others: "*Our people! Respond to God's call and have faith in Him. He will forgive you your sins and deliver you from grievous suffering.*" (Verse 31) They considered the revelation of the Qur'ān a call on everyone who learned of it, whether human or *jinn*, to believe. They also considered Muḥammad, (peace be upon him), to be the one who called them to believe in God merely by reciting the Qur'ān. Hence their appeal to their people: "*Respond to God's call and have faith in Him.*" (Verse 31) They also believed in the Day of Judgement and learnt that belief and positive response to the Divine call ensured forgiveness of sins and deliverance from punishment. So they imparted this news to their people.

Ibn Isḥāq considers that this concludes what the *jinn* said to their people, but the context suggests that the next two verses were also stated by them. We think that this is more likely, particularly the next verse: "*He who does not respond to God's call cannot elude Him on earth, nor will they have any protector against Him. They are indeed in manifest*

error." (Verse 32) This is a logical complement to the warning given by the *jinn* to their people whom they advised to believe in the new message. It is also likely that they explained that a negative response leads to dire consequences. No one who rejects the Divine call can escape God: He is always able to inflict punishment. The unbeliever will find none to support him against God or protect him from His punishment. He is, therefore, indeed in manifest error.

Likewise, the next verse most probably reports more of what the *jinn* said, as they wondered at those who reject God's call, thinking that they are immune from punishment or that there will be neither reckoning nor requital: "*Are they not aware that God, who has created the heavens and the earth and was not wearied by their creation, has the power to bring the dead back to life? Yes, indeed. He has power over all things.*" (Verse 33)

This is a reference to the book of the universe mentioned at the *sūrah*'s outset. The Qur'ān often provides such a close connection between a direct statement and a similar one occurring within a story or historical account, ensuring the confirmation of the same fact from two sources. The book of the universe testifies to His great might. It imparts to us the feeling that bringing the dead back to life is easy. This is what is intended here. That this point is made here in the form of a question and a reply makes it more emphatic. This is followed by the general comment that God has power over all things. Thus, bringing the dead back to life is included within His limitless power.

As Resurrection Takes Place

Having referred to bringing the dead back to life, the *sūrah* paints a picture of reckoning and accountability as though we see all this before our eyes:

> *On the Day when the unbelievers will be brought before the fire, [they will be asked]: 'Is this not the truth?' They will answer: 'Yes, by our Lord.' He will say: 'Taste, then, this suffering, for you were unbelievers.'* (Verse 34)

The scene here begins with a narrative, or an introduction to a narrative: "*On the Day when the unbelievers will be brought before the fire...*" The audience are waiting for the narrative describing what will happen, but instead of a description, the scene is present before our eyes, with a dialogue taking place: "*Is this not the truth?*" What a question! It falls like a hammer on the heads of those who used to reject the truth, ridicule the message and hasten the punishment they were warned against. Now they are face to face with the truth they used to deny. They arrive at an answer, in fear and humility: "*Yes, by our Lord.*" Now they swear '*by our Lord*', the very Lord whose messenger they rejected and whose Lordship they denied. Now they swear by Him affirming the truth they once denied.

At this point, the matter reaches maximum rebuke. The dialogue is over and the issue is settled: "*He will say: 'Taste, then, this suffering, for you were unbelievers.'*" (Verse 34) It is just an answer to a simple question: the crime is seen in full clarity and the criminal admits his guilt. The outcome is settled.

This scene is portrayed very speedily. This is deliberate because the confrontation is decisive. There is no room for argument. They used to deny the truth; now they acknowledge it and are made to suffer the consequences.

Following this scene that decisively spells out the fate of the unbelievers, and the one that touches the hearts of a group from a different world, the *sūrah* makes its final statement. It instructs the Prophet to remain patient with them and not to hasten their punishment. He has seen what awaits them, which is close at hand:

> *Remain, then, patient in adversity, just as all messengers endowed with firm resolve bore themselves with patience. Do not seek to hasten their punishment. On the Day when they see what they were promised, it will seem to them as though they had dwelt [on earth] no more than an hour in a single day. This has been made clear. Will, then, any be destroyed except the evildoers?* (Verse 35)

Every word in this verse is charged with meaning; every phrase draws a whole world of images and impressions and refers to great issues and

values. "*Remain, then, patient in adversity, just as all messengers endowed with firm resolve bore themselves with patience. Do not seek to hasten their punishment.*" (Verse 35) This is a directive given to Muḥammad (peace be upon him) who had shown more patience than anyone can tolerate while suffering persecution at the hands of his people. He grew up an orphan in their midst, then lost his guardian as well as every human support, one by one, losing his father, mother, grandfather, uncle as well as the wife who was the symbol of loving care. Thus he was free of all preoccupations, dedicating himself totally to his message. Yet he received at the hands of his unbelieving relatives more trouble than at the hands of others unrelated to him. He had to approach tribe after tribe, as well as individuals, seeking support in delivering his message but only meeting with rejection time after time. Some even set their henchmen against him and he was stoned and injured. His response was nothing more than a passionate appeal to his Lord, as quoted earlier.

Yet after all this, the Prophet is given this directive by his Lord: "*Remain, then, patient in adversity, just as all messengers endowed with firm resolve bore themselves with patience. Do not seek to hasten their punishment.*" (Verse 35) This shows just how hard and difficult the call to Islam is. A man like Muḥammad, the symbol of dedication, unshakeable belief and purity of heart, still needs this Divine directive to remain patient and not to hasten God's punishment of the adversaries of his message. The hardships he met along this road required that he be comforted and counselled to remain patient. He also needed a sweet dose of Divine compassion, followed by reassurance: "*On the Day when they see what they were promised, it will seem to them as though they had dwelt [on earth] no more than an hour in a single day.*" (Verse 35) It is all a short duration, an hour of a day. This whole life is so short and trivial that all the effects it has on hearts and souls is no more than the effect of an hour in a day. Then they will meet their inevitable fate and abide endlessly.

This hour of a life serves only to make things clear before the fate is sealed: "*This has been made clear. Will, then, any be destroyed except the evildoers?*" (Verse 35) Certainly not. God wishes no injustice for anyone. Every advocate of the Divine message must remain patient in adversity. Last as much as it may, the adversity will be no longer than an hour of a day, and then everything is settled.

SŪRAH 47

Muḥammad

Prologue

This *sūrah*, Muḥammad, was revealed in Madīnah. It also goes by another name, *al-Qitāl*, meaning 'Fighting'. This secondary title is very apt because fighting is the *sūrah*'s subject matter providing most of its images and giving it its distinctive beat. It begins with an explanation of the true nature of both the unbelievers and the believers which takes the form of a moral attack on the former and a monologue of praise of the latter. The clear implication is that God is the enemy of the unbelievers and the protector of those who have faith. Furthermore, this is a true fact in God's sight. Thus, the opening of the *sūrah* serves as a declaration of war by God against His enemies who are hostile to His faith: "*Those who disbelieve and debar others from God's path will have their deeds brought to nothing by Him, whereas those who have faith and do righteous deeds, and believe in what has been revealed to Muḥammad, for it is indeed the truth from their Lord – He will forgive them their bad deeds and bring them to a happy state. This is because the unbelievers follow falsehood, whereas those who believe follow the truth from their Lord. Thus does God lay down for mankind their rules of conduct.*" (Verses 1–3)

Once this declaration of war against the unbelievers is made, an express, resounding order is given to the believers to join this war against

them. This order is followed by an outline of the rules that apply to captives of war once the bloody battle is over: "*Now when you meet the unbelievers in battle, smite their necks. Then when you have thoroughly subdued them, bind them firmly. Thereafter, set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom, until war shall lay down its burden.*" (Verse 4) Added to this order is an explanation about the purpose of fighting and encouragement to the believers to join with it and do well, and a promise of honour for those who fall as martyrs. A further promise of help is given to those who join the fighting in support of God's cause, with an added rejoinder making clear that the unbelievers will be destroyed and their deeds will come to nothing: "*Thus [shall it be]. Had God so willed, He could have punished them Himself, but it is His will that He tests you all by means of one another. And as for those who are slain in God's cause, never will He let their deeds go to waste. He will grant them guidance, and bring them to a happy state, and will admit them to the Garden He has already made known to them. Believers! If you support [the cause of] God, He will support you and will make your steps firm; but as for the unbelievers, ill fortune awaits them as He will bring their deeds to nothing. This is because they hate what God has bestowed from on high, and thus He causes their deeds to go to waste.*" (Verses 4–9)

A strong warning is issued to the unbelievers, coupled with a declaration from God about His protection of the believers. The unbelievers will, thus, lose all; they will remain weak and lack support from any quarter: "*Have they never travelled through the land and seen what was the end of those who lived before their time? God destroyed them utterly. A similar fate awaits the unbelievers. This is because God protects the believers, while the unbelievers have no one to protect them.*" (Verses 10–11) A further warning singles out the city which drove the Prophet out: "*How many cities of greater power than this your city which has driven you out have We destroyed, and they had none to help them.*" (Verse 13)

Having opened with such a strong attack on the unbelievers, the *sūrah* adds a varied discourse on faith and unbelief, describing the states of the believers and the unbelievers both in this world and in the life to come. It distinguishes between a believer's enjoyment of

goodly things and the way unbelievers enjoy the pleasures of this world in a way that does not differ from that of cattle: "*God will indeed admit those who believe and do righteous deeds into gardens through which running waters flow, while those who disbelieve will enjoy their life [in this world] and eat as cattle eat; but the fire shall be their abode.*" (Verse 12) It describes what the believers will drink in heaven, variously pure water, milk with unaltered taste, delightful wine and pure, clarified honey. These drinks are so plentiful that they flow like rivers. Moreover, they have plenty of every type of fruit, together with God's forgiveness and His being pleased with them. A rhetorical question is then added: "*Are they to be compared to those who are to abide in the fire and be given a drink of scalding water that tears their bowels?*" (Verse 15)

This first round in the ever-raging battle between the believers and the unbelievers over, the *sūrah* starts another round with the hypocrites who, together with the Jews in Madīnah, represented a danger to the Muslim community. The problem they posed was no less serious than that of the idolaters who were waging open war on Islam from Makkah and its surrounding areas. The events to which the *sūrah* refers suggest that it talks about the period that followed the Battle of Badr but prior to the Encounter of the Moat.[1] The latter heralded a crushing defeat for the Jews and a serious setback for the hypocrites, as explained in our commentary on *Sūrah* 33, Volume XIV.

References to the hypocrites are made in the same confrontational and fighting manner as the rest of the *sūrah*. This is noticeable right from their first mention, which describes how they are absent minded when they sit with the Prophet and its comment that describes them as being far astray, following their desires: "*Some of them listen to you, but no sooner do they leave your presence than they [scornfully] say to those endowed with knowledge: 'What is it that he said just now?' Such are the ones whose hearts God has sealed, and who follow their desires.*" (Verse 16) They are warned that the Last Hour will inevitably come,

1. The Battle of Badr took place during Ramaḍān, year 2 of the Islamic calendar, while the Encounter of the Moat occured towards the end of year 5, (623 and 626 CE respectively) – Editor's note.

and, then, they will not even be able to take heed: "*Are they waiting for the Last Hour to come upon them of a sudden? Its portents have already come; but once it has arrived, what benefit will it then be to them if they take heed?*" (Verse 18)

The *sūrah* then describes their panic when they are confronted with an express Qur'ānic order to fight. They have pretended to be believers, and here we see how the *sūrah* makes abundantly clear the difference between them and true believers: "*The believers say: 'Would that a* sūrah *had been revealed.' Yet when a* sūrah *of clear import is revealed, and fighting is mentioned in it, you see those who are sick at heart staring at you like one who is about to faint for fear of death.*" (Verse 20) While they are urged to obey God and His messenger and to be truthful and firm, the *sūrah* condemns their behaviour and declares war against them. They are expelled from God's mercy: "*Far better for them would be obedience and an appropriate word. Moreover, when fighting is decided upon, it is better for them to be true to God. If you turn away now, is it to be expected of you that you will spread corruption in the land and break your ties of kinship? It is such as these whom God rejects, leaving them deaf and blind.*" (Verses 20–23)

The hypocrites' schemes are exposed: they listen to Satan and befriend the Jews and conspire with them against the believers. Therefore, they are warned about torture that would be inflicted on them at the point of death. They are also warned about exposure within the Muslim community to which they pretend to belong when they are not really part of it. On the contrary, they scheme against it: "*Those who turn their backs after guidance has been given to them are seduced by Satan who fills them with false hopes. That is because they say to those who abhor all that God has revealed, 'We will obey you in some matters,' but God knows all their secret schemes. How will they feel when the angels gather them in death, striking their faces and their backs? That is because they follow what incurs God's anger, and hate what pleases Him. Therefore, He will surely make all their deeds come to nothing. Do those who are sick at heart assume that God will never bring their malice to light? Had We so willed, We could have pointed them out to you, and you would have recognized them by their marks; but you will most certainly recognize them by the tone of their speech. God knows all that you people do. Most certainly We shall put*

you to the proof to see who of you strive hard and remain firm; and We shall test the truth of your assertions." (Verses 25–31)

The *sūrah*'s third and final round again takes up the attack against the unbelievers from among the Quraysh and the Jews: "*Those who disbelieve and debar others from the path of God, and take a hostile stand against the Prophet after they have seen the light of guidance, can in no way harm God; but He will surely make all their deeds come to nothing.*" (Verse 32) It warns the believers against falling into the same traps as their enemies: "*Believers, obey God and obey the messenger, and do not let your deeds come to nothing. Those who disbelieve and debar others from the path of God, and in the end die unbelievers shall not be granted forgiveness by God.*" (Verses 33–34) They are encouraged to remain firm during the fight: "*Therefore, do not lose heart or sue for peace. It is you who have the upper hand, and God is with you. He will never let your deeds go to waste.*" (Verse 35)

The life of this world is shown to be trivial. Believers are urged to spend some of their money to support God's cause. They are not meant to give away all they have; God knows their human nature and that they would find it too difficult to make such a sacrifice should it be asked of them: "*The life of this world is but play and amusement, but if you believe and are God-fearing, He will grant you your reward. He does not ask you to give up all your possessions. If He were to ask you all and press you hard, you would grow tight-fisted, and He would bring your malice to light.*" (Verses 36–37) The *sūrah* concludes with a note of warning to the Muslims, should they be niggardly, unwilling to spend some of their money for God's cause: "*You are called upon to give in God's cause, but some among you will turn out to be niggardly. Whoever is niggardly [in God's cause] is niggardly towards himself. God is the source of all wealth, whereas you are the ones in need. If you turn away, He will substitute other people for you, and they will not be like you.*" (Verse 38)

The air of battle colours the *sūrah* from start to finish; it is characteristic of its every section. The ending of its verses sound like heavy bombardments. When such endings are given a softer tone, they seem like swords branded in the air. The images the *sūrah* draws are as hard as the words expressing them. When referring to actual fighting,

the *sūrah* says: "*when you meet the unbelievers in battle, smite their necks.*" (Verse 4) The actual killing and the taking of prisoners is described graphically: "*Then when you have thoroughly subdued them, bind them firmly.*" (Verse 4) The condemnation of the unbelievers is expressed in equally powerful words: "*As for the unbelievers, ill fortune awaits them as He will bring their deeds to nothing.*" (Verse 8) The fate of earlier communities is also documented in a highly resounding way, both in words and connotations: "*God destroyed them utterly. A similar fate awaits the unbelievers.*" (Verse 10) As they are made to suffer in hell the unbelievers are shown as being "*given a drink of scalding water that tears their bowels*" (Verse 15) Likewise, the state of panic that overtakes the hypocrites is drawn intensely: "*you see those who are sick at heart staring at you like one who is about to faint for fear of death.*" (Verse 20) Even the gentle warning to the believers against turning away is given in the form of a decisive threat: "*If you turn away, He will substitute other people for you, and they will not be like you.*" (Verse 38)

Thus we see perfect harmony permeating the *sūrah*: its subject matter, images, connotations and rhythm.

I

Captives of War

Muḥammad

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

Those who disbelieve and debar others from God's path will have their deeds brought to nothing by Him, (1)

ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ وَصَدُّوا۟ عَن سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ
أَضَلَّ أَعْمَـٰلَهُمْ ﴿١﴾

whereas those who have faith and do righteous deeds, and believe in what has been revealed to Muḥammad, for it is indeed the truth from their Lord – He will forgive them their bad deeds and bring them to a happy state. (2)

وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَعَمِلُوا۟ ٱلصَّـٰلِحَـٰتِ وَءَامَنُوا۟
بِمَا نُزِّلَ عَلَىٰ مُحَمَّدٍ وَهُوَ ٱلْحَقُّ مِن رَّبِّهِمْ كَفَّرَ
عَنْهُمْ سَيِّـَٔاتِهِمْ وَأَصْلَحَ بَالَهُمْ ﴿٢﴾

This is because the unbelievers follow falsehood, whereas those who believe follow the truth from their Lord. Thus does God lay down for mankind their rules of conduct. (3)

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ ٱتَّبَعُوا۟ ٱلْبَـٰطِلَ وَأَنَّ
ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ ٱتَّبَعُوا۟ ٱلْحَقَّ مِن رَّبِّهِمْ كَذَٰلِكَ
يَضْرِبُ ٱللَّهُ لِلنَّاسِ أَمْثَـٰلَهُمْ ﴿٣﴾

فَإِذَا لَقِيتُمُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا فَضَرْبَ الرِّقَابِ حَتَّىٰ إِذَا أَثْخَنتُمُوهُمْ فَشُدُّوا الْوَثَاقَ فَإِمَّا مَنًّا بَعْدُ وَإِمَّا فِدَاءً حَتَّىٰ تَضَعَ الْحَرْبُ أَوْزَارَهَا ۚ ذَٰلِكَ وَلَوْ يَشَاءُ اللَّهُ لَانتَصَرَ مِنْهُمْ وَلَٰكِن لِّيَبْلُوَ بَعْضَكُم بِبَعْضٍ ۗ وَالَّذِينَ قُتِلُوا فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ فَلَن يُضِلَّ أَعْمَالَهُمْ ﴿٤﴾

Now when you meet the unbelievers in battle, smite their necks. Then when you have thoroughly subdued them, bind them firmly. Thereafter, set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom, until war shall lay down its burden. Thus [shall it be]. Had God so willed, He could have punished them Himself, but it is His will that He tests you all by means of one another. And as for those who are slain in God's cause, never will He let their deeds go to waste. (4)

سَيَهْدِيهِمْ وَيُصْلِحُ بَالَهُمْ ﴿٥﴾

He will grant them guidance, and bring them to a happy state, (5)

وَيُدْخِلُهُمُ الْجَنَّةَ عَرَّفَهَا لَهُمْ ﴿٦﴾

and will admit them to the Garden He has already made known to them. (6)

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا إِن تَنصُرُوا اللَّهَ يَنصُرْكُمْ وَيُثَبِّتْ أَقْدَامَكُمْ ﴿٧﴾

Believers! If you support [the cause of] God, He will support you and will make your steps firm; (7)

وَالَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا فَتَعْسًا لَّهُمْ وَأَضَلَّ أَعْمَالَهُمْ ﴿٨﴾

but as for the unbelievers, ill fortune awaits them as He will bring their deeds to nothing. (8)

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ كَرِهُوا مَا أَنزَلَ اللَّهُ فَأَحْبَطَ أَعْمَالَهُمْ ﴿٩﴾

This is because they hate what God has bestowed from on high, and thus He causes their deeds to go to waste. (9)

أَفَلَمْ يَسِيرُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ فَيَنظُرُوا كَيْفَ
كَانَ عَاقِبَةُ الَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِهِمْ ۚ دَمَّرَ اللَّهُ
عَلَيْهِمْ ۖ وَلِلْكَافِرِينَ أَمْثَالُهَا ﴿١٠﴾

Have they never travelled through the land and seen what was the end of those who lived before their time? God destroyed them utterly. A similar fate awaits the unbelievers. (10)

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّ اللَّهَ مَوْلَى الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَأَنَّ
الْكَافِرِينَ لَا مَوْلَىٰ لَهُمْ ﴿١١﴾

This is because God protects the believers, while the unbelievers have no one to protect them. (11)

إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُدْخِلُ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا
الصَّالِحَاتِ جَنَّاتٍ تَجْرِي مِن تَحْتِهَا
الْأَنْهَارُ ۖ وَالَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا يَتَمَتَّعُونَ
وَيَأْكُلُونَ كَمَا تَأْكُلُ الْأَنْعَامُ وَالنَّارُ
مَثْوًى لَّهُمْ ﴿١٢﴾

God will indeed admit those who believe and do righteous deeds into gardens through which running waters flow, while those who disbelieve will enjoy their life [in this world] and eat as cattle eat; but the fire shall be their abode. (12)

وَكَأَيِّن مِّن قَرْيَةٍ هِيَ أَشَدُّ قُوَّةً مِّن
قَرْيَتِكَ الَّتِي أَخْرَجَتْكَ أَهْلَكْنَاهُمْ
فَلَا نَاصِرَ لَهُمْ ﴿١٣﴾

How many cities of greater power than this your city which has driven you out have We destroyed, and they had none to help them. (13)

أَفَمَن كَانَ عَلَىٰ بَيِّنَةٍ مِّن رَّبِّهِ كَمَن زُيِّنَ لَهُ
سُوءُ عَمَلِهِ وَاتَّبَعُوا أَهْوَاءَهُم ﴿١٤﴾

Is he who takes his stand on a clear evidence from his Lord like one to whom the evil of his own deeds seems goodly, or like those who follow their own desires? (14)

Such is the paradise which the God-fearing are promised: In it are rivers of water for ever pure, rivers of milk the taste of which never alters, rivers of wine, a delight for those who drink, and rivers of honey pure and clarified. In it they shall have all kinds of fruit. And they receive there forgiveness by their Lord. Are they to be compared to those who are to abide in the fire and be given a drink of scalding water that tears their bowels? (15)

مَّثَلُ ٱلْجَنَّةِ ٱلَّتِى وُعِدَ ٱلْمُتَّقُونَ ۖ فِيهَآ أَنْهَٰرٌ مِّن مَّآءٍ غَيْرِ ءَاسِنٍ وَأَنْهَٰرٌ مِّن لَّبَنٍ لَّمْ يَتَغَيَّرْ طَعْمُهُۥ وَأَنْهَٰرٌ مِّنْ خَمْرٍ لَّذَّةٍ لِّلشَّٰرِبِينَ وَأَنْهَٰرٌ مِّنْ عَسَلٍ مُّصَفًّى ۖ وَلَهُمْ فِيهَا مِن كُلِّ ٱلثَّمَرَٰتِ وَمَغْفِرَةٌ مِّن رَّبِّهِمْ ۖ كَمَنْ هُوَ خَٰلِدٌ فِى ٱلنَّارِ وَسُقُوا۟ مَآءً حَمِيمًا فَقَطَّعَ أَمْعَآءَهُمْ ﴿١٥﴾

Belief in Muḥammad's Revelations

The *sūrah* opens with a straightforward attack against the unbelievers, without any introduction or preparatory remarks. These unbelievers, who debar others from God's path, are faced with the prospect of their deeds going astray and ending up with nothing. This applies to all unbelievers whether they are those who debar others on their own initiative, or they themselves are debarred and then debar others from God's path. At the outset, the *sūrah* gives us a sense of deeds being animated, physically on the move, but their movements are erroneous, far astray, and without any defining goal. The result brings utter loss and destruction. Such animation is employed to provide an image of a battle in which the deeds separate themselves from the people who perform them: the result is that both go further astray from each other, and all ends in ruin.

These deeds that are brought to nothing may refer, in particular, to the ones that the unbelievers hoped would bring them good results; in other words, they appeared to them as good deeds. However, a good deed that is not based on faith loses its value; its goodness is superficial. What is important is the motive that gives rise to the deed, not the form

of the deed. Even if the motive is good, unless it relies on faith it may be only temporary or the result of sudden impulse. Faith, on the other hand, links all man's actions and feelings to a solid base. This gives deeds their meaning and aim, bringing them consistency and ensuring that their effects are in line with the Divine system that links all parts of the universe together. Thus, every action is seen to contribute to the overall progress of the universe, fulfilling a role and serving an end.

On the other side stand "*those who have faith and do righteous deeds, and believe in what has been revealed to Muḥammad, for it is indeed the truth from their Lord.*" (Verse 2) These people are described as having faith, which certainly includes believing in Muḥammad's revelations, but this aspect of belief is specifically highlighted in order to give it prominence since "*it is indeed the truth from their Lord.*" Faith that is established in one's heart and conscience must be accompanied by action that is clearly seen in life. Such action is the fruit of faith that indicates its presence. Such people have a special status: "*He will forgive them their bad deeds.*" (Verse 2) This contrasts with what happens to the deeds of the unbelievers: they go astray, even though they may initially seem to be good. Thus, while even good deeds done by unbelievers end up in nothing, the bad deeds of the believers are forgiven. The contrast here is perfect and absolute, emphasizing the value of faith in God's sight and in real life. Yet their reward goes further than this as God will "*bring them to a happy state.*" (Verse 2) This is a great blessing which is second to faith in importance and effect. The verse gives here connotations of perfect comfort, assurance, peace and happiness. When a person is in such a happy state, his thoughts are sound, his heart is reassured, his feelings are at ease, and his soul enjoys a sense of peace and security. What other blessing would anyone want?

Why do things go in these two opposite directions? There is no question of favouritism or coincidence in all this. Instead, it all relies on the fundamental law upon which the universe was established when God created the heavens and the earth in accordance with the truth, making the truth its basic foundation: "*This is because the unbelievers follow falsehood, whereas those who believe follow the truth from their Lord.*" (Verse 3) Falsehood cannot put down deep roots in the universe. Therefore, it ends up in nothing, as does everything founded upon it.

Since the unbelievers follow falsehood, their deeds go astray and are brought to nothing. By contrast, the truth is the foundation on which the structure of the universe is built. Therefore, everything related to it stays on. Since the believers follow the truth from their Lord, He will forgive them their sins and bring them to a happy state. It is all clear, based on solid principles. "*Thus does God lay down for mankind their rules of conduct.*" (Verse 3) The believers are clear about these rules, they know the basis around which they should make their choices.

An Order to Fight

The principle stated in the first verse of the *sūrah* is made the basis of the directive to the believers to fight the unbelievers. The believers are the ones who follow the truth that must be established in human life on earth. It, truth, should be given the power to conduct life's affairs. Thus, human life becomes based on the truth and refers everything to it. The unbelievers, on the other hand, follow falsehood. This should be removed with all its effects on human life: "*Now when you meet the unbelievers in battle, smite their necks. Then when you have thoroughly subdued them, bind them firmly. Thereafter, set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom, until war shall lay down its burden.*" (Verse 4) This verse refers specifically to meeting in battle, not any other meeting between believers and unbelievers. Up to the revelation of this *sūrah*, idolaters lived in the Arabian Peninsula, some of whom were at war with the believers and some bound by peace treaties. *Sūrah* 9, Repentance, had not as then been revealed giving notice that treaties specifying dates of expiry would not be renewed. On the other hand, treaties without a specific term were given a four-month notice of termination. Thereafter, idolaters were to be killed if they were found anywhere in the Arabian Peninsula. The aim of these rules was to make the Peninsula the permanent base of Islam.[2]

The verse tells the believers specifically to smite the unbelievers' necks, but this only occurs after Islam is explained to them and they reject the call to accept it. The order is given in a way that describes the

2. This rule does not apply to idolaters outside the Arabian Peninsula; they could continue to live in the Muslim state but only in accordance with Islamic rules.

actual killing and the action it requires, so as to fit with the general ambience of the *sūrah*.

"*Then when you have thoroughly subdued them, bind them firmly.*" (Verse 4) The Arabic verb '*athkhana*', translated here as 'subdue', also connotes strong fighting involving killing of opponents. The situation the verse envisages as a result of fighting is the total collapse of the enemy's power so as to leave the enemy incapable of putting up any defence, let alone launching a counterattack. At this point only, captives are taken. While the enemy still has substantial force, the fight goes on to remove the danger it presents.

Thus, like most commentators on the Qur'ān, we see no conflict between this verse and the one in *Sūrah* 8, The Spoils of War, which remonstrates with the Prophet and the Muslims for taking many captives of war during the Battle of Badr. At the time, continuing the battle to kill more of the unbelievers was a better option. The relevant verses state: "*It does not behove a Prophet to have captives unless he has battled strenuously in the land. You may desire the fleeting gains of this world, but God desires for you the good of the life to come. God is Almighty, Wise. Had it not been for a decree from God that had already gone forth, you would have been severely punished for what you have taken.*"[3] (8: 67–68) This means that killing the enemy and breaking its power comes first. When this has been accomplished, captives may be taken. The wisdom in all this is clearly apparent. To remove aggression by forces hostile to Islam must be the first objective of fighting, particularly when the numerical strength of the Muslim community is well below that of the unbelievers. In such circumstances as prevailed at the time of the Battle of Badr, killing an enemy fighter was far more important in the balance of power between the two sides. However, this ruling remains valid in general, and it should be applied in any armed conflict with the aim of making the enemy powerless.

The Ruling on Captives of War

The verse then sets the ruling concerning those who are taken captive in war. This is the only Qur'ānic text stating a ruling on such captives:

3. These verses are explained in Vol. VII, pp. 198–202.

"*Thereafter, set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom.*" (Verse 4) This means that captives of war are to be set free gratis, without any compensation. No specified ransom or exchange of prisoners is required. The Qur'ānic verse does not mention any third option, such as putting idolater captives to death or binding them into slavery. Nevertheless, what happened in practice was that the Prophet and the caliphs succeeding him put some war captives into slavery, and killed specifically named individuals. We will quote what Imām Abū Bakr al-Jaṣṣāṣ, of the Ḥanafī school of Islamic law, says about this verse in his book *Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, making some comments as necessary. We will then conclude by stating our view of the relevant rulings:

> God says in this verse: "*Now when you meet the unbelievers in battle, smite their necks.*" On the surface, the statement makes it clear that killing the unbelievers is the only option until they have been thoroughly subdued. This is consistent with what God says in the other verse: "*It does not behove a Prophet to have captives unless he has battled strenuously in the land.*" (8: 67) Ibn 'Abbās is quoted as saying that this last statement applied to the Battle of Badr, when the Muslims were a small minority. When their numbers increased and they became more powerful, God established the ruling: "*Thereafter, set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom.*" Thus, God allowed the Prophet and the believers all options: to kill their prisoners, enslave them or set them free. However, the transmitter of this *ḥadīth* doubts whether Ibn 'Abbās mentioned enslaving prisoners.

Since the reporter was uncertain that Ibn 'Abbās mentioned slavery in this context, we discard that option altogether. As for killing such prisoners of war, we see no basis for this in the verse under discussion. The verse mentions only freeing them either as an act of grace or against ransom.[4]

4. The author makes several comments on this lengthy quotation. We have included his comments in separate paragraphs so as to distinguish them from the quoted text. – Editor's note.

> Al-Suddī is reported to have commented on the ruling, "*set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom*," saying that it has been abrogated by the subsequent verse in *Sūrah* 9, stating: "*slay the idolaters wherever you find them.*" (9: 5) However, we say that the Qur'ānic statements: "*Now when you meet the unbelievers in battle, smite their necks,*" and "*It does not behove a Prophet to have captives unless he has battled strenuously in the land,*" and "*Should you meet them in battle, make of them a fearsome example for those who follow them,*" are most probably outlining valid rulings, none of which has been abrogated. God commanded His messenger to kill the unbelievers and not to take captives from among them until they had been thoroughly subdued. This was the case when the Muslims were small in number, compared with their enemy. In that situation, only when the unbelievers were subdued after being killed in numbers and were made an example of to those who followed them, was it then permissible to take some of them captive, keeping them alive. This should be a permanent rule, applicable at any time when the Muslims are in a similar situation to that which prevailed in the early days of Islam.

In comment, we say that the order to kill the idolaters wherever they were found applied specifically to the idolaters in the Arabian Peninsula. The verse in the present *sūrah* is general in its import. When the enemy is thoroughly subdued and its power is smashed, it is permissible to take prisoners. This was the practice followed by the caliphs after the Prophet. Prisoners were killed only in particular cases which we will explain presently.

> The statement, "*set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom,*" provides for one of two alternatives: freeing the prisoners either by an act of grace or against ransom, which suggests that killing them was prohibited. However, early scholars differ on this point. Al-Ḥasan is reported to have objected to killing prisoners of war, saying that they should be freed against ransom or indeed without it. 'Aṭā' is also reported to have held this view.

When asked what to do with prisoners, al-Ḥasan answered: 'Do with them what the Prophet did with the prisoners taken in the Battle of Badr: they were freed by an act of grace or against ransom.' Ibn 'Umar was given a prisoner, a man of high position from the city of Iṣṭakhr, so that he could kill him, but he refused to do so citing the Qur'ānic statement: "*set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom.*" Likewise, Mujāhid and Ibn Sīrīn are reported to have spoken against killing prisoners of war. We have already mentioned al-Suddī's view that this ruling was abrogated by the other Qur'ānic instruction: "*slay the idolaters wherever you find them.*" (9: 5) Likewise, Ibn Jurayj is of this view. He cited the case of 'Uqbah ibn Abī Mu'ayṭ whom the Prophet ordered to be killed after he was taken prisoner during the Battle of Badr.

Scholars from all provinces are unanimous that a prisoner of war may be killed, and we do not know of any taking a different view. Reports are numerous that the Prophet sanctioned such killing. He ordered the execution of 'Uqbah ibn Abī Mu'ayṭ and al-Naḍr ibn al-Ḥārith after the Battle of Badr, and Abū 'Azzah, the poet, after the Battle of Uḥud. He also put the Qurayẓah prisoners to death when they accepted Sa'd ibn Mu'ādh's judgement to the effect that their men must be executed and their offspring be enslaved. From among them, he set al-Zubayr ibn Bāṭā free by an act of grace. When he conquered Khaybar, partly by war and partly by peaceful agreement, he stipulated a clear condition on Ibn Abī al-Ḥuqayq, but when his treachery was exposed, he ordered his execution. When he later entered Makkah, he ordered the killing of a number of people, stating that they should be killed, 'even if found clinging to the robes of the Ka'bah.' However, he freed the people of Makkah and took nothing of their property.

Abū Bakr is quoted to have said: "I wish I had not ordered al-Fujā'ah to be burnt when he was brought to me. I wish I had ordered his execution normally or set him free." Abū Mūsā al-Ash'arī mentions that he executed the chief priest of al-Sūs, after he had given him a guarantee of safety for a number of people

whom the priest named. However, he forgot to include himself, and therefore, the guarantee of safety did not apply to him. So, Abū Mūsā ordered his execution.

All these reports and *aḥādīth* confirm, without any doubt, that the Prophet and his Companions approved the execution of prisoners of war or setting them free. This is the consensus of scholars in all regions.

The permissibility of executing prisoners of war cannot, however, just be based on the Qur'ānic statement. It should instead be viewed against the actions of the Prophet and some of his Companions. When we carefully consider all the cases where prisoners were killed, we find that they were all special; in other words, there were additional militating factors other than merely fighting against Muslims and subsequent captivity. The men killed after the Battles of Badr and Uḥud, namely, 'Uqbah, al-Naḍr and Abū 'Azzah, respectively, were all hostile opponents who were determined to harm the Prophet. The case of the Qurayẓah Jews was also special, given they had agreed, in advance, for judgement to be passed on them by Sa'd ibn Mu'ādh. In all these cases we find special reasons placing them outside the general rule on prisoners of war stated in this verse: "*set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom.*" (Verse 4)

Scholars differed on setting prisoners free against ransom. Those of our school, the Ḥanafī, maintain that a prisoner cannot be set free against financial ransom, and cannot be sold to the enemy so as to join them again in fighting. Abū Ḥanīfah also states that a prisoner of war cannot be set free in exchange for Muslim prisoners. In no way should he ever be returned to join an enemy army. Abū Yūsuf and Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan differ with Abū Ḥanīfah on this point, allowing the exchange of prisoners of war between Muslims and non-Muslims. This last view is subscribed to by major scholars like al-Thawrī and al-Awzā'ī. Al-Awzā'ī adds that it is permissible to sell prisoners of war to the enemy, but the men among them may not be sold except in an exchange of prisoners. On the other hand, al-Muznī quotes al-Shāfi'ī as saying

that a Muslim ruler may set male prisoners of war free by an act of grace or against ransom after their defeat.

Those who approve of exchange of prisoners and setting enemy prisoners free against financial ransom cite in support of their view the Qur'ānic statement: "*set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom.*" This apparently permits setting them free against ransom and in exchange for Muslim prisoners. They also cite the fact that the Prophet set Quraysh prisoners from the Battle of Badr free against financial ransom. As for the permissibility of an exchange of prisoners, they cite in support a *ḥadīth* reported by 'Imrān ibn Ḥuṣayn: "The Thaqīf tribe took two Companions of the Prophet prisoner, and the Muslims took a man from the tribe of 'Āmir ibn Ṣa'ṣa'ah prisoner. The Prophet passed by this prisoner when he was tied up, and the man called him. The Prophet went to him. He asked: 'Why am I taken prisoner?' The Prophet said: 'Because of your allies' offence.' The man said: 'But I am a Muslim.' The Prophet replied: 'Had you said this when you were free, you would have greatly prospered.' The Prophet moved away, but the man called him again. When the Prophet went to him, he said: 'Feed me, for I am hungry.' The Prophet said: 'This is what you need.' The Prophet then exchanged him for the two men taken captive by the Thaqīf."

In our view, the evidence in support of those who say that prisoners of war may be set free against ransom is weightier and more valid than that stated in support of the view of al-Jaṣṣāṣ's school. This is true even though they differ concerning the form of ransom and whether it is financial or in exchange with Muslim prisoners of war. Imām al-Jaṣṣāṣ concludes his discussion by endorsing the view of his Ḥanafī school of Islamic law:

As for the mention in this verse of freeing prisoners as an act of grace or against ransom, along with what is reported of the action concerning the prisoners during the Battle of Badr, all this is

abrogated by the Qur'ānic verse that says: "*Slay the idolaters wherever you find them, and take them captive, besiege them, and lie in wait for them at every conceivable place. Yet if they should repent, take to prayer and pay the* zakāt, *let them go their way.*" (9: 5) We have mentioned that this is the view of al-Suddī and Ibn Jurayj. Further confirmation of the abrogation is seen in the verse that says: "*Fight against those who – despite having been given Scriptures – do not truly believe in God and the Last Day, and do not treat as forbidden that which God and His messenger have forbidden, and do not follow the religion of truth, till they [agree to] pay the submission tax with a willing hand, after they have been humbled.*" (9: 29) Both verses speak of the duty to fight against the unbelievers until they accept Islam or pay tribute, or *jizyah*. To free them against ransom runs contrary to this. All commentators on the Qur'ān and scholars of *ḥadīth* agree that *Sūrah* 9, Repentance, was revealed later than *Sūrah* 47, Muḥammad, which means that the rulings it states abrogate the earlier ones including that of freeing them against ransom.

We have already stated that this ruling to kill idolaters unless they adopt Islam is specific to idolaters living in the Arabian Peninsula. Others living outside it can live in the Muslim state and pay a tribute, just like the payment of tribute is accepted from followers of earlier religions. That the tribute is accepted from them when they submit to the rule of the Muslim state does not preclude that some of them may fall prisoner before such submission. What ruling applies to such prisoners, then? We say that a Muslim ruler may free them by an act of grace if he determines that this serves the interests of the Muslim community. He may also free them against financial ransom or in exchange for Muslim prisoners, when their people continue to have a fighting force and remain hostile. When the enemy renounces hostility by agreeing to pay tribute to the Muslim state, a different situation applies with clearly specified rulings. This means that the ruling concerning prisoners of war continues to be valid in cases that are not settled by the payment of tribute.

What We Say

To sum up, this is the only Qur'ānic text providing a ruling on prisoners of war. All other texts relate to situations other than that of taking prisoners. Therefore, this represents the permanent basis for dealing with this question. In those cases where the practice differed, this was the result of specific and temporary situations. Putting some prisoners to death applied only in individual cases, which could be similar to future ones. Those individuals were executed for actions they committed before being taken prisoner. They were not killed merely for fighting the Muslims. A spy, for example, may be taken prisoner and tried. In this case, he is tried for spying, not for being an enemy soldier taken prisoner in open battle. His captivity merely brought him under the authority of the Muslim state.

A word needs to be said about placing prisoners of war in slavery. We have already stated on more than one occasion that this was in response to prevalent universal situations and common practices in war. These situations made it impossible for Islam to implement in all circumstances the general statement "*set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom*," when enemy camps used to put any Muslim taken prisoner into slavery. Therefore, this ruling was applied by the Prophet in certain situations: he set free some prisoners in acts of grace, while in other cases he exchanged prisoners and in still other cases, he accepted financial ransom. In some cases prisoners were made slaves in order to deal with situations that could not be otherwise dealt with.

Should all camps agree not to treat prisoners of war as slaves, Islam reverts to its single positive ruling in the matter: "*set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom.*" Putting prisoners into slavery is not an Islamic rule; it is a procedure dealing with special circumstances. This is the view that we derive from this clear Qur'ānic statement and from carefully studying different cases, events and situations.

I should perhaps make it clear that I support this view because the Qur'ānic statements and the study of events and cases support it. It does not occur to me that I should defend Islam against the accusation that it puts prisoners into slavery. Such a thought I never entertain. Had Islam adopted this practice, it would have been the right and

better one. No human being with any degree of good manners would ever say that his view is better than God's ruling. I only look at the Qur'ānic text, its wording and spirit. It is on this basis that I have formulated my view.

All this, i.e fighting, smiting the necks of unbelievers, binding them firmly and dealing with the captives according to this rule, continues "*until war shall lay down its burden.*" (Verse 4) This means until war is over between Islam and its opponents. It remains the permanent Islamic rule. According to a *ḥadīth* related by Abū Dāwūd on Anas's authority, the Prophet says: "*Jihād* shall continue until the Day of Judgement." Its purpose is to ensure that God's word remains supreme.

The Purpose of *Jihād*

God does not require believers to fight and go on *jihād* because He needs their help against the unbelievers. Far be it from Him to need help. He is able, should He wish, to destroy those unbelievers utterly. It is all a test for mankind which determines everyone's position:

> *Thus [shall it be]. Had God so willed, He could have punished them Himself, but it is His will that He tests you all by means of one another. And as for those who are slain in God's cause, never will He let their deeds go to waste. He will grant them guidance, and bring them to a happy state, and will admit them to the Garden He has already made known to them.* (Verses 4–6)

Those unbelievers who debar people from God's path, and their ilk throughout the earth, at all times, and those despots who exercise power unjustly and appear to command force and authority, behaving in all arrogance, are no more than a handful of creatures living on earth. The earth is nothing but a tiny little planet floating in the midst of countless other planets, stars, celestial systems and galaxies whose sizes and numbers are known only to God. In the universal expanse, worlds and galaxies appear merely as scattered points, and as though they float aimlessly. None other than God controls them all and ensures harmony between them.

Despots, their entourages and followers, indeed all people on earth, are no more than small ants when compared with God's power. No indeed, they are not even like tiny particles blown everywhere by a light breeze. They are just nothing. When God commands believers to smite the necks of unbelievers and to bind them firmly after they have been utterly subdued, He only makes of them a tool of His power. Had He so willed, He would have dealt with them directly, as He did with those whom he destroyed by floods, a stunning blast or wind. He can indeed punish them Himself, without using any of these forces. God, however, wants the best for the believers. Therefore, He tests them and cultivates what is good in them, making it easier for them to do the best of good works.

God wants to test the believers, bringing out the best potential in man. The highest level a human being attains is when the truth he believes in becomes so dear to him that he will fight for it, exposing himself to death, but also being willing to kill his opponents. He simply will not compromise on this truth he believes in, and cannot live or love life unless it be under such truth. God wants to cultivate the believers, so that every desire and aspiration pertaining to this transitory life on earth, dear as it may be normally to man, is progressively weakened. He wants to purge them of their weaknesses and compensate them for their shortcomings until all their desires respond to the call to *jihād* and the earning of His pleasure. God will thus know that those people have successfully passed the test and have been properly cultivated. They do not make their choices on impulse, but on the basis of careful consideration.

God also wants to elevate the believers. When they go through the hardships of *jihād*, exposing themselves to the danger of death at every turn, they learn to care little for this danger. For most people, however, this is so frightening that they shed much of their moral values and dignity to avoid it. Yet it is of little consequence to those who are used to exposing themselves to it, whether they eventually avoid it or not. To turn to God alone at every moment of danger produces an effect which is best compared to an electric shock. It is like remoulding people's hearts and souls in full clarity and purity.

Moreover, such a test provides the means to put the affairs of the whole community on the right basis, placing its leadership in the hands of those who strive so strenuously for God's cause ready to sacrifice themselves for it. Such people care little for worldly riches and luxuries. When they are the ones who have the leadership of human society, the whole world will be set on the right footing. Furthermore, it facilitates the way for people to earn God's pleasure and His reward without having to face the reckoning. By contrast, those in the opposite camp find it easy to do what incurs God's displeasure and exposes them to His punishment. Everyone will have his way made easy for him to follow, according to God's knowledge of the true nature of all.

Thus, God tells us about those who are killed, fighting for His cause: "*And as for those who are slain in God's cause, never will He let their deeds go to waste. He will grant them guidance, and bring them to a happy state, and will admit them to the Garden He has already made known to them.* (Verses 4–6) The first thing to note here is the contrast between what happens to the deeds of martyrs and what happens to those of unbelievers. In the case of the unbelievers, the *sūrah* started with the statement that "*their deeds [are] brought to nothing,*" by God. Here the verse says of martyrs: "*never will He let their deeds go to waste.*" Theirs are good deeds, done in accordance with Divine guidance, linked to the solid truth by which they are motivated and in defence of which they are undertaken. They will remain because the truth is permanent and will never be lost.

We then face the great truth of the continuing life of martyrs killed in God's cause. This is a fact already stated in the Qur'ān: "*Do not say of those who are killed in God's cause, 'They are dead.' They are alive, although you do not perceive that.*" (2: 154) This great truth is presented here in a new light. We see the life of the martyr extending and growing in the way it followed before it left this world, the way of obedience to God and sacrifice for His cause: "*He will grant them guidance, and bring them to a happy state.*" (Verse 5) It was for the cause of God that they were slain and so He will continue to guide them after their martyrdom, promising them that they will attain to a happy state, as their souls will be purged of any traces of earthly life's burdens. They will grow in purity so as to be suited to the absolute purity of the ones

on high to which they are raised. This means that theirs is a continuing, uninterrupted life except in an earthly sense. God takes care of their lives, increases them in guidance, purity and shining. Ultimately, He fulfils His promise to them, for He "*will admit them to the Garden He has already made known to them.* (Verse 6)

A *ḥadīth* related by Aḥmad quotes the Prophet as saying: "A martyr is given six special privileges: with the first drop of his blood, he is forgiven every sin he has ever committed; he sees his position in heaven; and he is given his maiden companions, security from the greatest fear, torment in the grave and his adornment of true faith." Another *ḥadīth* related by al-Tirmidhī and Ibn Mājah specifically states that a martyr is made to see his position in heaven. This is how God makes heaven known to martyrs, and such is the end of continuing guidance and the happy state they are brought into after departing life on earth.

Purely for God's Sake

The *sūrah* then urges the believers to dedicate themselves to God and the implementation of His code in human life. It promises them His support in battle as well as defeat and hardship for His and their enemies:

> *Believers! If you support [the cause of] God, He will support you and will make your steps firm; but as for the unbelievers, ill fortune awaits them as He will bring their deeds to nothing. This is because they hate what God has bestowed from on high, and thus He causes their deeds to go to waste.* (Verses 7–9)

How do believers support God so as to fulfil the condition and receive what He has promised them of His support and steadying their step? What God requires of them is that they should be fully dedicated to Him, associating no partners with Him whatsoever, whether in a subtle or open way. They must love God more than they love themselves or their desires. They must refer to His rulings on everything they desire or wish for, as well as on their public and private actions, their thoughts and feelings. Such is the way to support God within ourselves.

Moreover, we know that God has laid down a complete code for life, based on certain rules and values; in short, a complete concept of life and the universe. In practical life, our supporting God is fulfilled when we make this code the arbiter of everything we do, when we implement His way of life in all aspects.

We need to reflect for a moment on the two phrases: "*those who are slain in God's cause,*" and "*If you support God.*" In both cases of being slain and giving support, the basic condition is that the action should be dedicated to God and serve His cause. Although this goes without saying, it is often blurred when faith suffers from deviation in one generation or another. In such cases we notice that words like martyrdom and *jihād* are twisted to serve cheap causes. It should be clear that there is no such thing as *jihād*, martyrdom or admission into heaven unless such *jihād* is for God's cause only, death for His sake alone, and the support we give within ourselves and in society is to Him alone. The objective must be that His word should be supreme; that His law and code of living should rule over people's consciences, morality, behaviour, laws and systems. Abū Mūsā al-Ash'arī reports: "The Prophet was asked about a person who fights to prove his bravery, support his people or to show off: which of these could be fighting in God's cause? He answered: 'Only the one who fights so that God's word remains supreme fights for God's cause.'" [Related by al-Bukhārī, Muslim, Abū Dāwūd, al-Nasā'ī and al-Tirmidhī.] There can be no other banner or goal under or for which people can fight and fall martyrs to be included in God's promise of admission to heaven other than His banner and His cause. This is true no matter what banner is raised and no matter what goals are defined under deviant systems and governments.

Advocates of Divine faith are best advised to understand this truth and keep it in their minds pure of any deviant concept. They must never allow thoughts that are alien to the Islamic faith to creep into their minds. If people strive for any purpose other than making God's word supreme, then their striving is not for Him, and when they are killed they do not earn martyr status. They cannot expect God's help and cannot hope to be in heaven. Advocates of Divine faith must make their vision clear. If they find this hard, the least they can do is to free

their thoughts and feelings from the concepts of their environment which are in conflict with the essence of God's conditional statement: "*Believers! If you support [the cause of] God, He will support you and will make your steps firm.*" (Verse 7)

Such is the condition God requires to be fulfilled by believers. What He gives them in return is His support, ensuring victory and making their steps firm. This is God's promise which never fails. If it is delayed at some point, its delay serves another purpose which is accomplished when God's support, victory and firmness of step are fulfilled.[5]

We need to reflect a little on the way God's promise is stated: "*He will support you and will make your steps firm.*" The Arabic word, *yanṣurkum*, translated here as '*support you*', also means '*gives you victory*'. We tend to think first that firmness of step is necessary before victory can be achieved; in fact, it is an important element in gaining victory. This is so true. That it occurs second in this text indicates a different meaning. What is intended here is that believers remain firm when victory has been achieved so that they can shoulder the responsibilities that come with victory. Victory is not the end of the battle between faith and unfaith, the truth and falsehood. Victory imposes certain duties within the minds of the victorious and in life generally. Those who achieve victory must not allow conceit to creep into their minds, nor should they grow complacent. Many people may remain steadfast when the going is tough and the hardships are plenty, but few are those who do not weaken after victory or when life is easy and comfortable. To remain steadfast, upholding the truth after victory, is an even higher grade than gaining victory. Perhaps this is the meaning intended in this verse, but God knows best.

"*As for the unbelievers, ill fortune awaits them as He will bring their deeds to nothing.*" (Verse 8) This is the opposite of granting help and firmness of step. This is an invocation of ill fortune which means that they will inevitably have ill fortune, humiliation and lack of support. Furthermore, their deeds will come to nothing, which means utter loss. The reason for all this is stated: "*This is because they hate what*

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5. For further clarification of this point, see Vol. XII, pp. 134–142.

God has bestowed from on high, and thus He causes their deeds to go to waste. (Verse 9)

This describes what they entertain of hatred to what God has revealed: the Qur'ān containing His law and the code He lays down for human life. This is what prompts them to stubbornly reject the faith and entertain futile argument about it. Many are those with corrupt minds who hate the sound Divine code and find themselves, by nature, in conflict with it. We often meet such people and we sense their deep hatred of Islam and everything related to it. They are scared by the mere mention of it. In fact, such hatred is easily noticed these days.

Because of their hatred of God's revelations, He let their deeds go to waste. Again the Qur'ān uses its preferred method of drawing images. The Arabic word, *aḥbaṭa*, translated here as *'cause to go to waste'*, normally describes cattle with swollen bellies as a result of feeding on poisoned grass. This ends in certain death. In the same way, those people who hate God's revelations find their deeds swollen and apparently growing, only to end in waste and utter loss. It is a vivid image that shows motion, and an end corresponding to that of the ones who hate God's revelations and admire their own works that appear to them great. Yet they are only swollen in the same way as the bellies of cattle grazing on poisonous grass.

Superficial Enjoyment

The unbelievers' attention is forcibly drawn to the fates of earlier ignorant communities:

> *Have they never travelled through the land and seen what was the end of those who lived before their time? God destroyed them utterly. A similar fate awaits the unbelievers.* (Verse 10)

This is a strong and forceful statement accompanied by loud noises and an image of the earlier communities witnessing the destruction of everything around them. All their possessions are amassed in heaps while they themselves are buried under the debris; it is an image of

total destruction. They are told that such a fate awaits all unbelievers; they will reap nothing but devastation and ruin: "*A similar fate awaits the unbelievers.*" (Verse 10) This fearful prospect contrasts with that of the believers who will receive support and victory: "*This is because God protects the believers, while the unbelievers have no one to protect them.*" (Verse 11) The constant rule being that when God is his protector, man need not worry about anything. Whatever happens to him should be seen as a test that heralds something good. It is never a sign of being abandoned by God, nor can it be seen as failure by God to fulfil His promise to support His servants. The one who is not so protected by God, however, will have no protection, even if all of mankind and the *jinn* are his patrons and supporters. Ultimately, he will be lost even though all means of protection and all sources of power known to mankind are at his disposal.

Having explained the lots of both believers and unbelievers when conflict and war erupt between them, the *sūrah* outlines their shares of enjoyment, making clear the distinction between the two:

> *God will indeed admit those who believe and do righteous deeds into gardens through which running waters flow, while those who disbelieve will enjoy their life [in this world] and eat as cattle eat; but the fire shall be their abode.* (Verse 12)

Believers who do good may sometimes be given luxuries and comforts of the best type to enjoy, but the comparison here is drawn between the believers' truly great share in heaven on the one hand and the total lot of the unbelievers on the other. The believers receive their share from God's hand in the heavens through which running waters flow. It is God who admits them there. Hence, it is a great, noble share given to them in reward for their faith and good deeds. By contrast, the share of the unbelievers is merely some enjoyment and the partaking of food '*as cattle eat*'. This is a miserable image unfit for man. It is an image of vulgar enjoyment and an animal-like approach to food, lacking both taste and manners. It is an enjoyment that is subject to no control; man has neither will, choice nor conscience in all this. Furthermore, it is unchecked by any sense of fear of God.

Regardless of their beliefs, people may have very fine culinary tastes and may be very selective in what they enjoy. This is certainly true of most people who grow up in wealthy families. This is not, however, what is referred to here. Rather, what the verse points to is that when man is in control of his will and has his values in place, he will choose only what is good in God's sight. He makes his choice using his will, free of the pressure of desire and cheap enjoyment. With such a will, he does not look at life as if it is a sumptuous feast of food and drink, or as though it is a chance for uncontrolled pleasure, paying little or no attention to what is lawful or unlawful.

The essential difference between man and animals is that man is equipped with free will and has a concept of life based on values stated by God, the Creator of all life. When man loses this, he sheds the most important qualities that distinguish him from other creatures and for which God has granted him special honour.

This series of comparisons between believers and unbelievers is interrupted by a reference to the city that drove the Prophet out, comparing it with other cities and communities that perished even though they were far more powerful: "*How many cities of greater power than this your city which has driven you out have We destroyed, and they had none to help them.*" (Verse 13) This verse is reported to have been revealed when the Prophet was on his way from Makkah to Madīnah, having been driven out by the unbelievers. It was revealed by way of consolation to him, reminding him that those unbelievers who had opposed his message so determinedly, until he and his followers had to abandon their land and property and migrate for the sake of their faith, are truly powerless. In the end, they are subject to God's power.

The Reward: a Physical Image

The comparison between the two groups continues. This by virtue of an explanation outlining why the believers are admitted into gardens of bliss in the life to come after they have been given support and honour in this present life. It also explains why the unbelievers who lived a life of animal enjoyment in this world, are subjected to punishment in the next life:

> *Is he who takes his stand on a clear evidence from his Lord like one to whom the evil of his own deeds seems goodly, or like those who follow their own desires?* (Verse 14)

There is a fundamental difference between the conditions, codes of life and behaviour of the two groups. The believers are equipped with clear evidence from their Lord. They recognize the truth and are certain of its source. They receive their directives and instructions from God and are sure of what they receive. No deception or error exists in their way of life. The unbelievers, by contrast, are deceived, thinking their deeds to be good when they are essentially bad. They do not make certain of what they receive nor whether it is true or good. They only '*follow their own desires*' with no standard of control to refer to and with no light to help them distinguish what is true and what is false. Are these two groups alike? The answer can only be in the negative for they are fundamentally different in their conditions and practices. Hence, they cannot be the same in their rewards and destinies.

Then follows an image of the differences between the two in the ends to which they are heading:

> *Such is the paradise which the God-fearing are promised: In it are rivers of water for ever pure, rivers of milk the taste of which never alters, rivers of wine, a delight for those who drink, and rivers of honey pure and clarified. In it they shall have all kinds of fruit. And they receive there forgiveness by their Lord. Are they to be compared to those who are to abide in the fire and be given a drink of scalding water that tears their bowels?* (Verse 15)

Such physical descriptions of reward and punishment in the hereafter occur in several places in the Qur'ān. They may be accompanied with other mental images or given on their own. Likewise, mental images are often given on their own in the Qur'ān. It is God who has created mankind, and He knows best what affects and influences them and what is conducive to cultivating the better elements in their nature. He also knows what enjoyment or suffering is best in bringing out the best in them. People possess different qualities and characteristics that

are all combined within human nature but differ in their manifestation in each individual. Hence, God has given us detailed accounts of the types of comfort and suffering, pleasure and pain, according to His absolute knowledge of His creatures.

Some people are best motivated to good action and most contented with their reward when they are told that they shall have rivers of pure water, healthy milk, pure, clarified honey and delightful wine, as well as fruits of all kinds, together with forgiveness that ensures their admission to heaven. These people are given what is suitable to cultivate the best in them and ensure that they receive their fitting reward. There are others who worship God because they want to thank Him for the countless blessings He has given them, or because they love Him and try to draw closer to Him through their worship, just as lovers lean towards each other, or because they are too ashamed to be seen in any condition that does not please God. In their worship, they do not look up to heaven and hell, bliss or suffering. These are best motivated when they read God's words: "*As for those who believe and do righteous deeds, God will certainly bestow love on them.*" (19: 96) They feel their greatest bliss when they learn that they will be "*in a seat of truth, in the presence of an all-powerful Sovereign.*" (54: 55)

It is reported that the Prophet used to stand up in night worship until his feet swelled. 'Ā'ishah, his wife, asked him why he did so when God had assured him of total forgiveness for all his sins, past and future. He replied: "'Ā'ishah! Should I not, then, be a grateful servant of God?" [Related by Muslim.] Rābi'ah al-'Adawiyyah wondered: "Would it be true that without heaven and hell, no one would have worshipped or feared God?" When Sufyān al-Thawrī, a leading scholar of the *Tābi'īn* generation, asked her about the nature of her faith in God, she said to him: "I do not worship God for fear of hell or craving for heaven. I would then be no better than a miserable hired servant. I worship Him because I yearn to meet Him."

In between these two types there is a wide range of different natures and mentalities. They all find in what God describes of bliss and suffering, reward and punishment, what ensures the cultivation of what is best in them in this present life and what is fitting as a reward in the life to come. It should be noted that the images of happiness and

suffering grow in sophistication as the listeners become more refined by greater exposure to the Qur'ān, and according to the types of situations being addressed. This is true of all generations and communities.

The requital is of two types: the first includes all these rivers together with plentiful and varied fruit as well as God's forgiveness. The other is thus outlined: "*Are they to be compared to those who are to abide in the fire and be given a drink of scalding water that tears their bowels?* (Verse 15) Again, this is a physical image of fierce torture that fits the ambience of the *sūrah*. It also fits the crude nature of the unbelievers, for they are the ones who approach their enjoyments and their food like animals. It is a crude atmosphere. Hence, they are requited with boiling water that tears at their bowels and bellies. The two groups are totally different in their nature and code of life. Most certainly their requital will not be the same.

2

What Fate for Sealed Hearts

Some of them listen to you, but no sooner do they leave your presence than they [scornfully] say to those endowed with knowledge: ‘What is it that he said just now?’ Such are the ones whose hearts God has sealed, and who follow their desires. (16)

وَمِنْهُم مَّن يَسْتَمِعُ إِلَيْكَ حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا خَرَجُوا۟ مِنْ عِندِكَ قَالُوا۟ لِلَّذِينَ أُوتُوا۟ ٱلْعِلْمَ مَاذَا قَالَ ءَانِفًا ۚ أُو۟لَـٰٓئِكَ ٱلَّذِينَ طَبَعَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِهِمْ وَٱتَّبَعُوٓا۟ أَهْوَآءَهُمْ ﴿١٦﴾

As for those who accept Divine guidance, God increases them in guidance and causes them to grow in the quality of God-fearing. (17)

وَٱلَّذِينَ ٱهْتَدَوْا۟ زَادَهُمْ هُدًى وَءَاتَىٰهُمْ تَقْوَىٰهُمْ ﴿١٧﴾

Are they waiting for the Last Hour to come upon them of a sudden? Its portents have already come; but once it has arrived, what benefit will it then be to them if they take heed? (18)

فَهَلْ يَنظُرُونَ إِلَّا ٱلسَّاعَةَ أَن تَأْتِيَهُم بَغْتَةً ۖ فَقَدْ جَآءَ أَشْرَاطُهَا ۚ فَأَنَّىٰ لَهُمْ إِذَا جَآءَتْهُمْ ذِكْرَىٰهُمْ ﴿١٨﴾

Know, then, that there is no deity other than God, and pray to Him to forgive you your sins, and to forgive all believing men and women. God knows all your comings and goings, as well as your abiding at rest. (19)

فَٱعْلَمْ أَنَّهُۥ لَآ إِلَـٰهَ إِلَّا ٱللَّهُ وَٱسْتَغْفِرْ لِذَنۢبِكَ وَلِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَٱلْمُؤْمِنَـٰتِ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ يَعْلَمُ مُتَقَلَّبَكُمْ وَمَثْوَىٰكُمْ ﴿١٩﴾

The believers say: 'Would that a *sūrah* had been revealed.' Yet when a *sūrah* of clear import is revealed, and fighting is mentioned in it, you see those who are sick at heart staring at you like one who is about to faint for fear of death. Far better for them would be (20)

وَيَقُولُ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ لَوْلَا نُزِّلَتْ سُورَةٌ ۖ
فَإِذَآ أُنزِلَتْ سُورَةٌ مُّحْكَمَةٌ وَذُكِرَ فِيهَا
ٱلْقِتَالُ ۙ رَأَيْتَ ٱلَّذِينَ فِى قُلُوبِهِم مَّرَضٌ
يَنظُرُونَ إِلَيْكَ نَظَرَ ٱلْمَغْشِىِّ عَلَيْهِ مِنَ
ٱلْمَوْتِ ۖ فَأَوْلَىٰ لَهُمْ ﴿٢٠﴾

obedience and an appropriate word. Moreover, when fighting is decided upon, it is better for them to be true to God. (21)

طَاعَةٌ وَقَوْلٌ مَّعْرُوفٌ ۚ فَإِذَا عَزَمَ ٱلْأَمْرُ
فَلَوْ صَدَقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ لَكَانَ خَيْرًا لَّهُمْ ﴿٢١﴾

If you turn away now, is it to be expected of you that you will spread corruption in the land and break your ties of kinship? (22)

فَهَلْ عَسَيْتُمْ إِن تَوَلَّيْتُمْ أَن تُفْسِدُوا۟
فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ وَتُقَطِّعُوٓا۟ أَرْحَامَكُمْ ﴿٢٢﴾

It is such as these whom God rejects, leaving them deaf and blind. (23)

أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ ٱلَّذِينَ لَعَنَهُمُ ٱللَّهُ فَأَصَمَّهُمْ
وَأَعْمَىٰٓ أَبْصَٰرَهُمْ ﴿٢٣﴾

Will they not, then, try to understand the Qur'ān? Or are there locks on their hearts? (24)

أَفَلَا يَتَدَبَّرُونَ ٱلْقُرْءَانَ أَمْ عَلَىٰ
قُلُوبٍ أَقْفَالُهَآ ﴿٢٤﴾

Those who turn their backs after guidance has been given to them are seduced by Satan who fills them with false hopes. (25)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱرْتَدُّوا۟ عَلَىٰٓ أَدْبَٰرِهِم مِّنۢ بَعْدِ
مَا تَبَيَّنَ لَهُمُ ٱلْهُدَى ۙ ٱلشَّيْطَٰنُ سَوَّلَ
لَهُمْ وَأَمْلَىٰ لَهُمْ ﴿٢٥﴾

That is because they say to those who abhor all that God has revealed, 'We will obey you in some matters,' but God knows all their secret schemes. (26)

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ قَالُوا۟ لِلَّذِينَ كَرِهُوا۟ مَا نَزَّلَ ٱللَّهُ سَنُطِيعُكُمْ فِى بَعْضِ ٱلْأَمْرِ ۖ وَٱللَّهُ يَعْلَمُ إِسْرَارَهُمْ ﴿٢٦﴾

How will they feel when the angels gather them in death, striking their faces and their backs? (27)

فَكَيْفَ إِذَا تَوَفَّتْهُمُ ٱلْمَلَٰٓئِكَةُ يَضْرِبُونَ وُجُوهَهُمْ وَأَدْبَٰرَهُمْ ﴿٢٧﴾

That is because they follow what incurs God's anger, and hate what pleases Him. Therefore, He will surely make all their deeds come to nothing. (28)

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمُ ٱتَّبَعُوا۟ مَآ أَسْخَطَ ٱللَّهَ وَكَرِهُوا۟ رِضْوَٰنَهُۥ فَأَحْبَطَ أَعْمَٰلَهُمْ ﴿٢٨﴾

Do those who are sick at heart assume that God will never bring their malice to light? (29)

أَمْ حَسِبَ ٱلَّذِينَ فِى قُلُوبِهِم مَّرَضٌ أَن لَّن يُخْرِجَ ٱللَّهُ أَضْغَٰنَهُمْ ﴿٢٩﴾

Had We so willed, We could have pointed them out to you, and you would have recognized them by their marks; but you will most certainly recognize them by the tone of their speech. God knows all that you people do. (30)

وَلَوْ نَشَآءُ لَأَرَيْنَٰكَهُمْ فَلَعَرَفْتَهُم بِسِيمَٰهُمْ ۚ وَلَتَعْرِفَنَّهُمْ فِى لَحْنِ ٱلْقَوْلِ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ يَعْلَمُ أَعْمَٰلَكُمْ ﴿٣٠﴾

Most certainly We shall put you to the proof to see who of you strive hard and remain firm; and We shall test the truth of your assertions. (31)

وَلَنَبْلُوَنَّكُمْ حَتَّىٰ نَعْلَمَ ٱلْمُجَٰهِدِينَ مِنكُمْ وَٱلصَّٰبِرِينَ وَنَبْلُوَا۟ أَخْبَارَكُمْ ﴿٣١﴾

Overview

In this passage the *sūrah* speaks about the hypocrites. In the first instance it depicts their attitude towards the Prophet and the Qur'ān, then their attitude to fighting which God requires Muslims to undertake in the service of His cause. Finally, it reveals their attitude towards the Jews and their conspiring with them against Islam and the Muslim community.

It should be remembered that hypocrisy first started in Madīnah. It did not exist in Makkah, as the situation there made it totally unnecessary. In Makkah, the Muslims suffered persecution and no one needed to appease them. When God facilitated support for Islam with its acceptance by the two tribes of Madīnah, the Aws and the Khazraj, the new faith spread into all clans and families. There were Muslims in every home in Madīnah. Some, however, hated to see the Prophet and Islam gaining power but dared not make their hostility public. Therefore, they pretended to be Muslim when in reality they were full of hatred for Islam. They were also keen for ill fortune to befall the Prophet and his Companions. Their chief was 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy ibn Salūl.

A Jewish community also lived in Madīnah. The Jews had a military and economic presence as well as organizational strength at the time the Prophet settled in Madīnah. They also hated the Prophet, his faith and his followers. The presence of such Jews offered encouragement to the hypocrites: essentially, the two groups were united in their hatred of Islam and the Muslims. As a result, they conspired and exploited every opportunity to undermine the Muslim community. When the Muslim community experienced difficult circumstances, their opponents made their hostility all the more apparent; and when the Muslims enjoyed good times, they resorted to covert action and wicked conspiracy. Up to the middle of the Prophet's stay in Madīnah, these two groups represented a real danger to Islam and the Muslim community.

Repeated mention of the hypocrites and their schemes occur in the *sūrahs* revealed in Madīnah, and in which they come in for clear denunciation. Their contacts with the Jews and cooperation with them

is also referred to in such revelations. In the present passage, we have such references to both the hypocrites and the Jews.

How Divine Guidance Works

> *Some of them listen to you, but no sooner do they leave your presence than they [scornfully] say to those endowed with knowledge: 'What is it that he said just now?' Such are the ones whose hearts God has sealed, and who follow their desires.* (Verse 16)

The phrase, '*some of them*', may refer to the unbelievers who were the subject of discussion in the first passage of the *sūrah*. In this case, the hypocrites are considered as a group of unbelievers, although they conceal their reality. In this sense, the *sūrah* is referring to their true status. On the other hand, the phrase may refer to the Muslims, considering that the hypocrites were integrated with them, pretending to belong to their community. They were indeed treated as Muslims, as Islam requires us to deal with people on the basis of what they profess to be. In either case, however, they are hypocrites as their description in the *sūrah* and their deeds indicate.

The hypocrites' question, after they had listened to the Prophet, shows how they only pretended to pay attention to what he was saying when their minds were inattentive, preoccupied with other things, or rather were sealed altogether. It also suggests an implicit ridicule. Since they address their question to people endowed with knowledge asking about the meaning of what they heard, they imply that what Muḥammad said was incomprehensible. Despite having paid attention to it, they still could not understand its meaning. It further implies ridicule of those knowledgeable people who attended carefully to everything the Prophet said, making an effort to understand it fully and memorize it, as the Prophet's Companions used to do. In this way, using blatant or subtle mockery, these hypocrites asked them to repeat the Prophet's words. In all these possibilities we see wickedness, deep resentment and hatred: "*Such are the ones whose hearts God has sealed, and who follow their desires.*" (Verse 16)

Such is the condition of the hypocrites. Those who follow Divine guidance, however, are totally different:

> *As for those who accept Divine guidance, God increases them in guidance and causes them to grow in the quality of God-fearing.* (Verse 17)

The order of reporting events in this verse calls for reflection. The believers start by accepting guidance, and God rewards them by increasing this guidance so that they do not err. He further gives them an even more profound reward, as He "*causes them to grow in the quality of God-fearing.*" This quality makes a person's heart always apprehensive, feeling that God is watching him, fearing that he might incur God's displeasure whilst hoping to earn His pleasure, and ashamed that God may see him in a situation of which He disapproves. Such a keen sensitivity is the essence of being God-fearing. It is a great prize which God grants to whomever He chooses of His servants when they accept His guidance and strive to earn His pleasure. Guidance, sensitivity and being God-fearing describe a condition that is the opposite of the hypocrisy described in the previous verse.

The *sūrah* picks up its description of the hypocrites who leave the Prophet's presence having understood nothing of his teachings, which aim to enhance people's fear of God, and remind them of what is certain to come of reckoning and requital:

> *Are they waiting for the Last Hour to come upon them of a sudden? Its portents have already come; but once it has arrived, what benefit will it then be to them if they take heed?* (Verse 18)

What do these people who sit with the Prophet and later leave, having understood or learnt nothing, wait for? Are they waiting for the Last Hour to come upon them all of a sudden while they are preoccupied with worldly matters? Well, the portents of the Last Hour have already come, as have its signs. The revelation of the last Divine message is the clearest of all these portents. It announces that it is the last warning before the appointed time for the Last Hour. The Prophet

is quoted as saying: "I was sent with my message, nothing separates me from the Last Hour more than what separates my two fingers." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] If time appears to have extended long since the Prophet's time, we should remember that God's days are different from our days. According to God's reckoning, its first signs have already come. No reasonable person should allow it to come upon him all of a sudden, when he can no longer attend to a duty: "*Once it has arrived, what benefit will it then be to them if they take heed?*" This serves as a strong reminder to those who are oblivious.

The *sūrah* then addresses the Prophet and the well-guided people who follow him telling them to follow a different course based on true knowledge, remembrance of God and seeking His forgiveness and feeling that He watches over them and knows everything about them. They will then be on their guard as they await the Last Hour:

> *Know, then, that there is no deity other than God, and pray to Him to forgive you your sins, and to forgive all believing men and women. God knows all your comings and goings, as well as your abiding at rest.* (Verse 19)

This directive points first of all to the need to always remember the first truth which the Prophet and those who follow him uphold: "*Know, then, that there is no deity other than God.*" Once this truth is firmly established in man's conscience, other directives are given: "*And pray to Him to forgive you your sins.*" This is said to the Prophet whom God has already forgiven his past and future sins, because it is the duty of every believer who is aware that his efforts fall short of fulfilling his duty, no matter how hard he tries. In this way, every believer feels that his prayer for forgiveness serves as an aspect of glorifying God and thanking Him for His forgiveness. Moreover, it is a lesson to the Prophet's Companions and followers who know his high position with his Lord, yet see that he is instructed to remember God and to pray to Him for forgiveness for himself and all believers, men and women. They know that God always answers the Prophet's prayers. They then feel that God has bestowed on them a great blessing by sending them this noble Prophet and instructing

him to pray to Him to forgive them. Thus, they are sure that He will forgive them their sins.

The final point in this directive is that "*God knows all your comings and goings, as well as your abiding at rest.*" (Verse 19) Thus a believer feels both reassurance and fear at the same time. He is reassured that he is under God's care wherever he is, and he is in fear because God knows every feeling and thought he may have, and is aware of his every secret. This is all part of education that keeps a believer always on the look out, keen to remain always on the right track.

The Hypocrites and *Jihād*

The *sūrah* describes the attitude of the hypocrites to fighting for God's cause and their utter cowardice when it is made obligatory upon Muslims. It exposes their true feelings about the whole idea of fighting, and explains what awaits them if they persist with hypocrisy. It warns them that they have to purge their hearts of hypocrisy, be true in their response to God and join the Muslim ranks with sincerity of purpose:

> *The believers say: 'Would that a* sūrah *had been revealed.' Yet when a* sūrah *of clear import is revealed, and fighting is mentioned in it, you see those who are sick at heart staring at you like one who is about to faint for fear of death. Far better for them would be obedience and an appropriate word. Moreover, when fighting is decided upon, it is better for them to be true to God. If you turn away now, is it to be expected of you that you will spread corruption in the land and break your ties of kinship? It is such as these whom God rejects, leaving them deaf and blind. Will they not, then, try to understand the Qur'ān? Or are there locks on their hearts?* (Verses 20–24)

The believers express their wishes for a new *sūrah* to be revealed because they love the Qur'ān and find in every part of it something that appeals to them and warms their hearts. Alternatively, this expression may be indicative of their desire to have certain aspects of *jihād* and fighting outlined to them. Therefore they say: "*Would that a* sūrah *had been revealed.*" (Verse 20)

We are then told that a *sūrah* with clear import that admits no divergence of opinion has been bestowed from on high. "*Fighting is mentioned in it,*" which means that this *sūrah* gives an order to the Muslim community to fight for God's cause, or outlines a ruling concerning those who disobey such an order. This is seen as a calamity by the hypocrites: they lose control of their feelings and their pretence is exposed. They appear weak, cowardly and spineless. Their pathetic condition is described in full colours: "*you see those who are sick at heart staring at you like one who is about to faint for fear of death.*" (Verse 20) This is a unique way of describing extreme fear, one that shows them shaking with fear, too weak to stand up. This inimitable image applies to everyone deprived of faith, true courage and a sense of shame when they face the possibility of death in war. This is the true nature of the hypocrites who are sick at heart.

When all false appearances are shed and the reality of cowardice is exposed, the hand of faith is stretched out to offer them what strengthens their resolve and gives them power if they would only take it with sincerity: "*Far better for them would be obedience and an appropriate word. Moreover, when fighting is decided upon, it is better for them to be true to God.*" (Verses 20–21) Undoubtedly, this is better for them than a scandal that exposes them as trembling, spineless cowards. It is better for them to be obedient to God's order, reassured that it is for their benefit and the benefit of their community, and to say a good, appropriate word expressing sincerity and purity of heart. When matters are resolved and fighting is decided upon, it is even better for them to be true to what they claim of commitment to His cause, manifesting this commitment with unwavering resolve and determined action. He will then give them added power and clear support that removes hardship, lightens the danger and ensures that they enjoy one of two noble prospects: either victory and safety on the one hand or martyrdom and admittance to heaven on the other. Such is the gift of faith that replaces fear with reassurance and weakness with courage and resolve.

The *sūrah* then addresses them directly, threatening them with dire consequences should their cowardice persist to the point where they abandon Islam altogether and revert to outright unbelief: "*If you turn*

away now, is it to be expected of you that you will spread corruption in the land and break your ties of kinship?" (Verse 22) The interrogative form, '*is it to be expected of you*', suggests that this is likely and gives a warning that this will lead them back into the ignorance that prevailed in their community before it was reformed by Islam. This is a state that makes people spread corruption and sever their ties of kinship.

Having made this direct address, the *sūrah* then speaks about them, rather than to them, showing what happens should matters reach the point they have been warned against: "*It is such as these whom God rejects, leaving them deaf and blind. Will they not, then, try to understand the Qur'ān? Or are there locks on their hearts?*" (Verses 23–24) '*It is such as these*' who persist with hypocrisy until they finally discard all pretence of belief in Islam who are the ones whom God rejects. He leaves them deprived of guidance, '*deaf and blind.*' They have not lost their hearing or their eyesight, but they have put these faculties to no use. Alternatively, they have deliberately stopped themselves from understanding what they hear and see. Thus, their faculties no longer function.

A rhetorical question is then asked: "*Will they not, then, try to understand the Qur'ān?*" (Verse 24) When people try to understand the Qur'ān, they see things in full clarity. They see the light. Their hearts and feelings enjoy new vigour and their souls are full of life. "*Or are there locks on their hearts?*" (Verse 24) When hearts are thus locked they are deprived of the light the Qur'ān spreads; they are in complete darkness.

Evil Conspiracy

The *sūrah* then shows the reason that made the hypocrites turn away from faith after having come close to it. We learn that this was because they conspired with the Jews of Madīnah and promised them help and support:

> *Those who turn their backs after guidance has been given to them are seduced by Satan who fills them with false hopes. That is because*

they say to those who abhor all that God has revealed, 'We will obey you in some matters,' but God knows all their secret schemes. (Verses 25–26)

The first of these two verses gives a physical image ofthe hypocrites abandoning Divine guidance after they came to know it. It is an image which shows them turning their backs and going away. It tells of what lies behind all this: it is Satan whispering to them and delivering all manner of temptations. Thus we see their movement for what it is in reality and appearance. The *sūrah* then tells us why Satan has such power over them, making them turn their backs on the truth after they knew it: "*That is because they say to those who abhor all that God has revealed, 'We will obey you in some matters'.*" (Verse 26)

The Jews of Madīnah were the first to hate what God revealed. They expected that God's final message would be given to them, with the last messenger chosen from among their own kind. They used to tell the pagan Arabs about this expected message and that its time was close to hand, saying that the new prophet would lead them and ensure that they would have power and that they would regain their kingdom. God, however, chose His last messenger from a different branch of Abraham's seed. This made them hate his message all the more. When the Prophet migrated to Madīnah, they hated his arrival there because they felt it threatened their own position. Therefore, they were hostile towards him from his very first day in Madīnah. When they realized that they were no match for the Muslims in open warfare, they resorted to wicked scheming and conspiracies. They were joined in this by all those bearing a grudge against Islam and every hypocrite. This war between them and the Prophet continued, going to and fro, until the Prophet removed them from Madīnah and then ensured that the Arabian Peninsula would remain totally for Islam.

Those hypocrites who turned their backs on Divine guidance said to the Jews: "*We will obey you in some matters.*" Most probably this refers to their wicked schemes and conspiracies against Islam and the Prophet. "*But God knows all their secret schemes.*" (Verse 26) This is a comment that implies a stern warning. What harm can their schemes produce when they are all known to God and exposed to His might?

This is followed by an open threat, one that puts them in the hands of God's own troops as they approach the ends of their lives: "*How will they feel when the angels gather them in death, striking their faces and their backs?*" (Verse 27) Here, we have another image of the utter humiliation suffered by the hypocrites. They are at the point when they depart from this life. Weak and powerless, they are about to start their second life, but this commences with their faces and backs being smitten. This happens to them at the point of death, when they are in utter distress. They are indeed completely forsaken: "*That is because they follow what incurs God's anger, and hate what pleases Him. Therefore, He will surely make all their deeds come to nothing.*" (Verse 28) They brought themselves to this end. It is they who have been hypocrites, disobeying God and conspiring with His enemies and the enemies of His messenger. It is they who hated what pleases God and adopted what incurs His displeasure. "*Therefore, He will surely make all their deeds come to nothing.*" (Verse 28) They used to admire their own deeds, thinking themselves clever as they schemed against the believers. Now they see how these deeds swell and grow only to be lost and to come to nothing.

The Threat of Exposure

At the end of this passage, they are warned that God may decide to expose them to the Prophet and the Muslims. They will then be known to all for what they really are: hypocrites living among Muslims, pretending to belong to them but conspiring against them:

> *Do those who are sick at heart assume that God will never bring their malice to light? Had We so willed, We could have pointed them out to you, and you would have recognized them by their marks; but you will most certainly recognize them by the tone of their speech. God knows all that you people do. Most certainly We shall put you to the proof to see who of you strive hard and remain firm; and We shall test the truth of your assertions.* (Verses 29–31)

The hypocrites thought that they were adept in hiding their reality, making the Muslims think they were like them, true believers. The

sūrah shows how naïve their thinking is and threatens them with an exposure that makes all their grudges known to the Muslims. God says to His messenger: "*Had We so willed, We could have pointed them out to you, and you would have recognized them by their marks.*" (Verse 30) This means that if God so wishes, He could point them out to the Prophet by name and position so he can recognize them from their features. This verse was revealed before God actually made some of them known to him by name. Nevertheless, the way they speak and their twisting of words and meanings, and the manner in which they address you tells you of their hypocrisy: "*but you will most certainly recognize them by the tone of their speech.*" (Verse 30) A comment is then added emphasizing God's knowledge of every deed and its motives: "*God knows all that you people do.*" (Verse 30) Nothing escapes His perfect knowledge.

Then follows God's promise to test the Muslim community as a whole so as to distinguish those who strive for His cause and remain steadfast through all difficulties. These people will then be known to all, with everything about them made clear. No confusion will persist, and the whole issue of hypocrisy and the hypocrites will be sorted out: "*Most certainly We shall put you to the proof to see who of you strive hard and remain firm; and We shall test the truth of your assertions.*" (Verse 31)

God is fully aware of everyone's true nature, as well as of their thoughts and inner feelings. He knows all this just as He knows what happens and what will happen. What need is there, then, for such a test? Who needs to know what the test will prove?

In His infinite wisdom, God deals with human beings on the basis of their nature, ability and potential. They do not know what He knows of inner facts. These must come into the open before they can know and understand them, and then make use of them. Testing people with what is good or bad, affluence and poverty, comfort and hardship certainly proves everyone's metal. Through such tests people may even come to know certain things about themselves of which they were otherwise unaware. As for God's knowledge of what the test reveals of people's nature, this refers only to His knowledge of their reality as it is exposed to people and they too are able to see it. It is when people

see this in a form they can comprehend that they are influenced by it. It shapes their feelings and charts the direction in which their lives move according to the means available to them. In this way God's purpose of testing people produces its results.

Nevertheless, believers always hope that they will not be put to God's tests and also hope that they will be spared such difficulties. Yet, should they be tested with hardship, they remain patient in adversity, aware that there is a good purpose behind this test. They submit to God's will, assured of His wisdom, and looking forward to His grace that follows the test. One devoted person, named al-Fuḍayl, was said to be in tears whenever he read this verse. He would appeal to God, saying: "My Lord, do not test us, because if You do, the truth about us will be known and the curtains we put up will be drawn apart. We will then be in trouble."

3

An Invitation to Sacrifice

Those who disbelieve and debar others from the path of God, and take a hostile stand against the Prophet after they have seen the light of guidance, can in no way harm God; but He will surely make all their deeds come to nothing. (32)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ وَصَدُّوا۟ عَن سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ وَشَآقُّوا۟ ٱلرَّسُولَ مِنۢ بَعْدِ مَا تَبَيَّنَ لَهُمُ ٱلْهُدَىٰ لَن يَضُرُّوا۟ ٱللَّهَ شَيْـًٔا وَسَيُحْبِطُ أَعْمَٰلَهُمْ ﴿٣٢﴾

Believers, obey God and obey the messenger, and do not let your deeds come to nothing. (33)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓا۟ أَطِيعُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُوا۟ ٱلرَّسُولَ وَلَا تُبْطِلُوٓا۟ أَعْمَٰلَكُمْ ﴿٣٣﴾

Those who disbelieve and debar others from the path of God, and in the end die unbelievers shall not be granted forgiveness by God. (34)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ وَصَدُّوا۟ عَن سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ ثُمَّ مَاتُوا۟ وَهُمْ كُفَّارٌ فَلَن يَغْفِرَ ٱللَّهُ لَهُمْ ﴿٣٤﴾

Therefore, do not lose heart or sue for peace. It is you who have the upper hand, and God is with you. He will never let your deeds go to waste. (35)

فَلَا تَهِنُوا۟ وَتَدْعُوٓا۟ إِلَى ٱلسَّلْمِ وَأَنتُمُ ٱلْأَعْلَوْنَ وَٱللَّهُ مَعَكُمْ وَلَن يَتِرَكُمْ أَعْمَٰلَكُمْ ﴿٣٥﴾

The life of this world is but play and amusement, but if you believe and are God-fearing, He will grant you your reward. He does not ask you to give up all your possessions. (36)

إِنَّمَا ٱلْحَيَوٰةُ ٱلدُّنْيَا لَعِبٌ وَلَهْوٌ ۚ وَإِن تُؤْمِنُوا۟ وَتَتَّقُوا۟ يُؤْتِكُمْ أُجُورَكُمْ وَلَا يَسْـَٔلْكُمْ أَمْوَٰلَكُمْ ﴿٣٦﴾

If He were to ask you all and press you hard, you would grow tight-fisted, and He would bring your malice to light. (37)

إِن يَسْـَٔلْكُمُوهَا فَيُحْفِكُمْ تَبْخَلُوا۟ وَيُخْرِجْ أَضْغَـٰنَكُمْ ﴿٣٧﴾

You are called upon to give in God's cause, but some among you will turn out to be niggardly. Whoever is niggardly [in God's cause] is niggardly towards himself. God is the source of all wealth, whereas you are the ones in need. If you turn away, He will substitute other people for you, and they will not be like you. (38)

هَـٰٓأَنتُمْ هَـٰٓؤُلَآءِ تُدْعَوْنَ لِتُنفِقُوا۟ فِى سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ فَمِنكُم مَّن يَبْخَلُ ۖ وَمَن يَبْخَلْ فَإِنَّمَا يَبْخَلُ عَن نَّفْسِهِۦ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ ٱلْغَنِىُّ وَأَنتُمُ ٱلْفُقَرَآءُ ۚ وَإِن تَتَوَلَّوْا۟ يَسْتَبْدِلْ قَوْمًا غَيْرَكُمْ ثُمَّ لَا يَكُونُوٓا۟ أَمْثَـٰلَكُم ﴿٣٨﴾

Overview

This last part of the *sūrah* speaks first about the unbelievers who debar others from God's way and are hostile to the Prophet despite being aware of the truth of his message. Most probably this refers to the idolaters the *sūrah* spoke about earlier. They are the ones who fit the description of bearing arrogant hostility towards the Islamic message. However, this new discourse may refer to all those who adopt such a hostile attitude including the Jews and the hypocrites in Madīnah. In this light, the present verses may be seen as a warning to them, should they adopt such an attitude, in public or private. The first possibility is perhaps more likely.

This part then devotes its final verses to an address to the believers, inviting them to carry on with their *jihād*, being ready to sacrifice their lives and their property, never slackening or giving in to calls for a truce in the fight against unbelieving aggressors. They must not be influenced by any consideration of their apparent weakness, or immediate interest. Nor can they be niggardly when they are asked for financial sacrifice. After all, God who knows man's natural instinct to hold tight to what he owns wants them to contribute only what they can easily afford. Should they fail to prove themselves worthy of advocating His message, God will deprive them of this honour and put in their place some other people who will shoulder the responsibility and fulfil the task. This is a strong warning that fits the general ambience of the *sūrah*. It also suggests that it was needed to deal with certain cases within the Muslim community, among true Muslims, not hypocrites. There could have been those who found it hard to make financial contributions side by side with those who gave great examples of courage, dedication and preparedness to sacrifice their all for the cause of Islam. Both types existed, and the Qur'ān aimed to motivate the lower group to rise and try to join the other in its sublime standards.

They Cannot Harm God

> *Those who disbelieve and debar others from the path of God, and take a hostile stand against the Prophet after they have seen the light of guidance, can in no way harm God; but He will surely make all their deeds come to nothing.* (Verse 32)

This verse states a true promise by God in relation to those who disbelieve and oppose the truth, trying to prevent it from being delivered to people, using their power, money and other means for the purpose. Such people are hostile to the Prophet, waging war against him and physically opposing him during his lifetime or suppressing his faith and code of life and persecuting the advocates of his message after his death. Yet such people have seen the light of guidance and recognized the truth embodied in the Islamic message, but they

stubbornly choose to remain blind to it and feel that their immediate interests are served by such an attitude.

God's true promise is that such people "*can in no way harm God.*" They are far too small and weak to be mentioned in the context of adversely affecting God. This is certainly not what is intended here. What the verse means is that they cannot harm God's faith, the code He laid down for human life, or those who advocate His message. Powerful as such people may become, they cannot affect or disturb the laws of nature He has set in operation. They may be able to harm some of the Muslims for a period of time, but this is merely a test that takes place for a purpose God wants to be fulfilled. It constitutes no real harm to God's laws or to His servants who advocate His faith and system. Moreover, the ultimate result of all the efforts of such hostile unbelievers is clearly set in advance: "*He will surely make all their deeds come to nothing.*" (Verse 32)

At the same time, the believers are warned against doing anything that could lead them to a similar fate. They are urged to remain obedient to God and His messenger: "*Believers, obey God and obey the messenger, and do not let your deeds come to nothing.*" (Verse 33) This directive suggests that within the Muslim community there were some who might not have been fully obedient, or who might have found it hard to fulfil some of the duties and sacrifices that combating the different powerful groups opposing Islam required. Some might have been tied by bonds of kinship or common interests with others on the opposing side and found it hard to sever such ties.

This directive had a profound effect on true believers. They were shaken by the implied threat that they might do something that would do away with their good deeds and bring them to nothing. Several reports speak of the way this verse was received. One of them mentions that "the Prophet's Companions used to think that when a person truly believed in God's oneness, then no sin he committed would harm him, in the same way as no good deed is of any use when done by a person who associates partners with God. However, when this verse was revealed, they feared that sins might ruin their good deeds: "*Believers, obey God and obey the messenger, and do not let your deeds come to nothing.*"

'Abdullāh ibn 'Umar is quoted as saying: "We, the Prophet's Companions, used to think that every good deed would inevitably be accepted by God until this verse was revealed. We wondered what thing could render our deeds worthless. We thought that it must be cardinal and grave sins. However, God revealed this verse: "*For a certainty, God does not forgive that partners should be associated with Him, but He forgives any lesser sin to whomever He wills.*" (4: 116) We stopped speaking about this issue. We only feared for those who committed cardinal sins and hoped for good reward for those who avoided them."

Such reports clearly show how true Muslims used to receive Qur'ānic verses. They were profoundly affected by them, fearing every warning, careful lest it applied to them and keen to do what the Qur'ān required of them. With such sensitivity, they achieved superb standards.

The next verse explains what fate awaits those who are hostile to the Prophet. These are they who are determined not to obey him and who continue in their rejection of the truth until death overtakes them: "*Those who disbelieve and debar others from the path of God, and in the end die unbelievers shall not be granted forgiveness by God.*" (Verse 34) The chance to ensure forgiveness of sins is available only in this present life. The gates of repentance, which ensure forgiveness, are open for both unbelievers and sinners up to the moment of death. When the spirit is at the point of departing the body, then the chance to repent and earn forgiveness is lost and can never be regained.

Verses like this one address both believers and unbelievers. It warns the latter to take the right action before it is too late, to repent and turn back to God before the chance is lost and doors are closed. It tells the former to take care so as to avoid all causes that bring them nearer to such ill-fated ways. This is clearly understood from the fact that what the believers are cautioned against in the next verse are seen as reasons leading to the same fate of the unbelievers mentioned in the preceding verse:

> *Therefore, do not lose heart or sue for peace. It is you who have the upper hand, and God is with you. He will never let your deeds go to waste.* (Verse 35)

Such are the things believers are cautioned against. They are presented with the fate of the unbelievers who are hostile to the Prophet, so that they take care not to do anything that brings them nearer to such an outcome. This warning suggests that there might have been some individuals among the Muslims who felt the burden and strain of *jihād* to be too heavy. They might have weakened and advocated making some sort of a peace deal in order to avoid fighting. Some of them might have looked to their relatives in the ranks of the unbelievers, or had some financial interests with them. All such reasons may make a person prefer peaceful arrangements. Human beings are always the same and Islam deals with such weaknesses and natural tendencies in its own way, which has proven to be remarkably successful. This, however, does not preclude that there remained, particularly in that early period in Madīnah, some traces of such tendencies and weaknesses.

The present verse aims to deal with such elements. Let us look carefully at how the Qur'ān progresses with its method of educating people and raising them to its standards: "*Therefore, do not lose heart or sue for peace. It is you who have the upper hand, and God is with you. He will never let your deeds go to waste.*" (Verse 35) You are the ones who are superior in faith and concept of life, because of your close link with the One who is the Most High. You have higher standards in your way of life, goals, objectives, feelings, morality, manners and behaviour. Therefore, you must not lose heart or sue for peace because you have the upper hand in strength, position and support. The Supreme Power grants you support: "*God is with you.*" You are not alone. God Almighty, with all His power, defends you and gives you help. How insignificant do your enemies appear when God is the One who helps you? Moreover, every effort you exert, everything you spend and every sacrifice you make is credited to you. Nothing is lost: "*He will never let your deeds go to waste.*" The reward for every iota of good work you do will certainly be yours. Why would anyone assured by God to have the upper hand, to be supported by Him and to have every effort rewarded lose heart? Why would he weaken when God tells him that he is honoured, victorious and rewarded?

The life of this world is of little importance. Believers may have to make some sacrifices during their lives on earth, but they will have

their reward in full in the life to come. Moreover, they are not asked to pay heavily in order to ensure such rewards:

> *The life of this world is but play and amusement, but if you believe and are God-fearing, He will grant you your reward. He does not ask you to give up all your possessions.* (Verse 36)

When life has no noble goal to achieve, and when people go through it heedless of the Divine code, it is no more than play and amusement. It is the code laid down by God that makes this life a prelude to a better and longer lasting life, makes of this life a period of action that yields its results in the life to come. Success in the life to come is, therefore, conditional upon good works in this present life. This is the message emphasized in the second sentence in the verse: "*If you believe and are God-fearing, He will grant you your reward.*" (Verse 36) Belief in God during this life and action based on fearing Him are the qualities that gives this present life an air of seriousness elevating it from being a time of play, amusement and material enjoyment to a standard fulfilling the assignment God has given man and for which He has provided proper and complete guidance. When man attends to his assignment in this way, he is a God-fearing believer. What he spends of worldly possessions to serve this cause will not be lost to him. In fact, it produces a far greater reward in the everlasting second life.

Even then, God does not require people to sacrifice all their property. He knows that by nature, man is tight-fisted with what he owns. He does not require him to do what is too hard for him. In fact, He does not charge anyone with more than what that person can reasonably attend to. He is too kind to ask people to sacrifice all they possess. If He were to ask them this, they would be troubled and their ill feelings would become apparent.

> *He does not ask you to give up all your possessions. If He were to ask you all and press you hard, you would grow tight-fisted, and He would bring your malice to light.* (Verses 36–37)

We see here how kind God is to man and how, in His infinite wisdom, He only requires people to do what they can, taking human

nature, with all its facets, into consideration. Islam is a Divine faith which aims to establish a human system on a Divine basis. It is God who lays down its foundation and fundamental principles, but it is human abilities and needs that should be considered in determining its responsibilities. It is God who created man and He knows best what He has created. He is the One who knows all.

Niggardly Man

The final step in this approach deals with the believers' prevailing conditions when they are called upon to make financial sacrifices for God's cause. Their niggardly attitude is dealt with in the same way that the Qur'ān dealt with the reluctance to make personal sacrifices when people are called upon to fight for His cause:

> *You are called upon to give in God's cause, but some among you will turn out to be niggardly. Whoever is niggardly [in God's cause] is niggardly towards himself. God is the source of all wealth, whereas you are the ones in need. If you turn away, He will substitute other people for you, and they will not be like you.* (Verse 38)

This verse provides an accurate description of the Muslim community at the time and how people in all communities react when they are called upon to make sacrifices. It says that some people will be niggardly. This means that others are not niggardly at all; they are prepared to sacrifice everything they have. This was certainly true as is authentically reported by several of the Prophet's Companions. In fact, the Qur'ān describes several such instances in different *sūrahs*. In this respect, Islam produced miraculous examples of people coming forward, with apparent joy, and making really exemplary sacrifices. However, this does not mean that there were not individuals who found it hard to make sacrifices. Indeed, some people may find it easier to put their lives at risk than to make financial sacrifices.

The present verse deals with this natural tendency: "*Whoever is niggardly is niggardly towards himself.*" Whatever contribution people

make is credited to them, and they need it on the Day when they are resurrected. Then, they will have nothing of whatever they owned in this life. All that is left for them is what is credited to their account. Therefore, when they are niggardly, they keep their balance low, depriving themselves of the great reward that financial sacrifice for God's cause surely earns. Thus, they are niggardly towards themselves.

This is absolutely true. God does not require them to make financial contributions for any reason other than the fact that He wants what is best for them. He benefits nothing by anything they spend on His cause. He is not in need of anything: "*God is the source of all wealth, whereas you are the ones in need.*" (Verse 38) It is He who gave you your money and possessions. He is also the One who saves for you whatever contributions you make. He does not need what He has given you in this life or the reward credited to you in the life to come. You are the ones who are in need of Him in both situations. You have nothing unless He grants it to you. Indeed, you will need all the reward He grants you in the hereafter. You cannot pay back to Him anything of what He has bestowed on you in this life, let alone have anything left in the hereafter. It is all given to you out of His grace. How can you be so niggardly?

The last word is decisive. That God has chosen you to be the advocates of His message is an honour and a great favour He bestows on you. You have to prove yourselves worthy of this honour. Unless you so prove yourselves by fulfilling the trust assigned to you, appreciating its value by discarding anything that is contrary to it, God will take back what He has favoured you with, granting this honour to some other people: "*If you turn away, He will substitute other people for you, and they will not be like you.*" (Verse 38)

Anyone who has experienced the great favour of faith, feeling the honour it represents and appreciating the great position he has in the universe as a result of being entrusted with this Divine mission recognizes this last statement in the *sūrah* as a very serious warning. As he walks on earth, such a person feels God's power and experiences His light filling his soul. He bears the emblem of faith. Should such a believer be deprived of true faith, be expelled from Divine care, and find God's door slammed in his face, he will not bear to live. Indeed, life would

become like hell for anyone who has experienced contact with his Lord and then been cut off.

Faith is a great favour and honour, unequalled by anything in the universe. Life becomes so cheap and money so trivial when faith is put on the scales against anything else. Therefore, the warning this last statement in the *sūrah* embodies is the most serious one a believer can receive from God Almighty.

SŪRAH 48

Al-Fatḥ

(Victory)

Prologue

This *sūrah* belongs to the Madīnan period, revealed as it was shortly after the signing of the peace treaty at al-Ḥudaybiyah in year 6 of the Islamic calendar. It comments on the events leading to the momentous signing of this treaty as also describes the situation in which the Muslim community found itself at that time. Between the revelation of this *sūrah* and *Sūrah* 47, Muḥammad, which precedes it in the Qur'ānic order, there was a lapse of three years which witnessed developments that had far-reaching effects on the life of the Muslim community in Madīnah. These involved changes in the attitudes of both the Muslim community and its opponents, and even greater changes in the Muslim community's psychological and mental framework. In this respect, it became far more mature in its understanding and implementing of faith.

Before we discuss the *sūrah* and its message, however, we need to review the major event that was the signing of the peace treaty so as to understand the circumstances then prevailing as the Muslim community received this new revelation.

The Prophet saw himself in a dream entering the Sacred Mosque in Makkah together with his Companions, some of them having shaven their heads and some with their hair cut short. The unbelievers in Makkah had prevented them entry into Makkah since their migration

to Madīnah. They did not even allow them entry during the four sacred months that all Arabs honoured in the pre-Islamic period, laying down their arms and regarding fighting during these times as a great enormity. Entry into Makkah during these four months was free for all, in perfect safety. Even people involved in vengeance killings would meet in peace at this time. A man would come across the killer of his father or brother without raising a finger against him, or trying to prevent his entry into the Sacred Mosque. Nevertheless, the idolaters in Makkah violated their well-established traditions, preventing the Prophet and the Muslims from entering Makkah throughout the six years that followed their migration to Madīnah. In year 6, the Prophet had this dream and reported it to his Companions who were delighted with it, realizing that a dream by a prophet would certainly come true.

For further information about these events we will mainly rely on the report given by Ibn Hishām as this is more detailed than most and also provides a fuller picture. It is also generally in agreement with reports in the two *Ḥadīth* anthologies of Imām al-Bukhārī and Imām Aḥmad, as well as the summary given by Ibn Ḥazm in his book *Jawāmi' al-Sīrah*, and with reports by other scholars.[1]

> The Prophet announced to his Companions and to the Arabian tribes around Madīnah that he intended to visit Makkah to honour the Ka'bah and to worship there. He invited them all to join him. Most of the Arabian tribes which had not yet accepted Islam were highly reluctant to join this peaceful expedition because they feared that the Quraysh were bound to resist the Muslims and prevent them from entering Makkah. If the Quraysh were determined to stop the Muslims, an armed conflict might erupt. Hence, those Arabian tribes wanted to stay out of it. The Muslims, however, were very glad to join the Prophet, who marched at the head of some 1,400 of his followers.[2]

1. I am quoting here my own version of the events. It is faithful to the report by Ibn Hishām, omitting only a few details that a reader who is unfamiliar with historical Arabic reports written more than 1,000 years ago would find difficult, and adding a few explanatory sentences. I do not, however, divert from the narrative as given by the author. – Editor's note.
2. Salahi, Adil, *Muhammad: Man and Prophet*, The Islamic Foundation, Leicester, 2002, p. 497.

The Prophet, however, marched on until he arrived at a place called Ghadīr al-Ashṭāṭ where Bishr ibn Sufyān gave him his report that the Quraysh were mobilizing and seeking the help of others to fight him and prevent him from entering Makkah.[3]

The Prophet was distressed at this report. He said: "How ill-advised is the Quraysh! What would they lose if they were to leave me alone addressing my message to the rest of Arabia? If those Arabs were to kill me, the Quraysh would have what they wish. If I am to be the victorious, they must either accept Islam without having suffered any losses, or fight me with their forces intact. What do they think? By God, I will continue to strive for the message God has given me until it is triumphant or I die."

Reflecting on the new situation after he had learnt that the Quraysh were preparing for armed conflict, the Prophet decided to try to avoid such an eventuality. Hence, he asked whether anyone in his camp was able to lead them through a route which took them away from the Quraysh, so that they could avoid an armed conflict with their advance force. A man from the tribe of Aslam came forward and led them through a very rough route which was very hard for the Muslims. Eventually, they found themselves in an open area which was easy to cross. The Prophet commanded them to take the right-hand route until they finally arrived at the plain of al-Ḥudaybiyah, to the south of Makkah, which was only a day's walk from the Holy City.

A Declaration of Peace

Suddenly, the Prophet's she-camel sat down. People shouted at her to make her rise again, but she would not move. Some people suggested that she refused to go forward. The Prophet told them that such a refusal was not in her nature. He said: "She is held back for the same reason which held back the elephant." This was a reference to an incident which took place nearly 60 years earlier

3. Ibid., p. 499.

when Abrahah, the ruler of the Yemen, was riding an elephant at the head of a large force, whose aim was to destroy the Ka'bah. Shortly before arriving in Makkah, the elephant sat still and would not move forward; it was ready to go back. Shortly afterwards, Abrahah's army was attacked by birds which threw stones at the army and destroyed it. The story is mentioned in a short *sūrah* of the Qur'ān entitled, The Elephant, and which may be translated as follows: "*In the name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful. Are you not aware how your Lord dealt with people of the Elephant? Did He not utterly confound their treacherous plan, and send against them flocks of birds, which pelted them with stones of sand and clay? Thus He made them like stalks of devoured leaves.*" (105: 1–5)

The Prophet then declared: "By Him Who holds my soul in His hand, I shall respond favourably to any proposal the Quraysh puts to me today which helps establish good relations and guarantees respect to God's sanctuaries." He then ordered his Companions to encamp.

The place was almost dry, with only one well with very little water. The Companions of the Prophet economized on water as much as they could, but the well soon dried up. When they were very thirsty, they complained to the Prophet. He came to the well, sat next to it and asked for a pail to be brought to him with whatever quantity of water they could find. He took some water in his hand, rinsed his mouth and prayed to God. He then asked his Companions to pour the water back into the well and told them to leave the well for a while. Some reports also suggest that the Prophet took an arrow from his bag and asked his Companions to throw it into the well. Soon the well was full of water and provided all the water the Muslims needed to drink, perform ablutions and give to their camels and other animals. They suffered no shortage of water until they departed.

Successive Emissaries

When the Quraysh realized that the Prophet had managed to evade their advance forces and that he was encamped at al-Ḥudaybiyah,

they decided to send a messenger to him. They were also aware that should they succeed in stopping Muḥammad from entering Makkah, when he had come with no purpose other than to visit the Sacred Mosque, their action would not go unquestioned by the other Arabs. Their prestige was derived from the fact that they were custodians of the Sacred House and that they prevented no one from worshipping there. The first emissary they sent was Budayl ibn Waraqā' of the tribe of Khuzā'ah, who went with a group of his fellow tribesmen. The tribe of Khuzā'ah was always sympathetic towards the Prophet. Some of its men had embraced Islam, but even those who had not were far from hostile to the message of Islam. Budayl spoke to the Prophet and told him that the Quraysh were determined to prevent him from entering Makkah. The Prophet assured him that he had no intention of fighting anyone. He wanted only to visit the Ka'bah and to demonstrate the Muslims' recognition of its sanctity. The Prophet's comment on the Quraysh's attitude was given in these words: "The Quraysh are now in such a state that they can think only of war. I am prepared to agree a truce with them, if they so desire. I ask them only to leave me alone to speak to people. If I am successful and other people follow me, then the choice is theirs to do likewise. If they refuse, they will have preserved their strength. If they are determined to stop me, I swear by God that I will fight them over this cause of mine until I die, and even then they cannot prevent what God wills."

Budayl went back to the Quraysh and said to them: "We have come to you after seeing this man and hearing what he says. Would you like to hear what he told us?" Some of them shouted: "We do not wish to hear anything he says." Some wiser people requested him to report what he had heard. When he finished his report, he pleaded with them, saying that they were rash in their attitude because Muḥammad did not intend to fight them. He wanted only to visit the Ka'bah.

The Quraysh leaders were not persuaded to moderate their attitude. They said: "Even if he does not want to fight, he will never be allowed to enter Makkah against our will. No one shall say that we allowed that to happen."

The Quraysh then sent Mikraz ibn Ḥafs to speak to the Prophet, and he came back with the same message as Budayl. The third envoy the Quraysh sent was al-Ḥulays ibn 'Alqamah, the leader of the Ḥabshī tribe. When the Prophet saw him coming from a distance, he said to his Companions: "This is a man who belongs to a religious community. Drive the sacrificial animals towards him so that he may see them." When al-Ḥulays saw the sacrificial animals, he returned to the Quraysh without speaking to the Prophet, because he realized that there should have been no cause for contention. He advised the Quraysh to leave Muḥammad alone and allow him to worship at the Ka'bah. They spoke harshly to him and told him to leave them alone. Al-Ḥulays was angered by the Quraysh's attitude, but they were not to be persuaded by any argument.

The Fourth Envoy

Having rejected the advice of all three envoys to allow Muḥammad to enter Makkah and worship at the Ka'bah, the Quraysh decided to send a fourth emissary. None of the existing reports throws any light on the reasons which made the Quraysh feel that sending another envoy to speak to the Prophet would bring about any change in the situation. It is not known what the Quraysh hoped to achieve by sending these envoys when it was not prepared to listen to their advice. Perhaps it was all a mark of the Quraysh's confusion. On the other hand, it may have been an exercise in self-justification. The Quraysh might have wanted to be able to say that they tried all they could to reach accommodation with Muḥammad. Be that as it may, the man the Quraysh chose this time was 'Urwah ibn Mas'ūd, a leader of the tribe of Thaqīf, which lived in the town of Ṭā'if. 'Urwah, however, wanted first to make sure that on his return he would not receive the same harsh treatment as the other envoys the Quraysh sent, should he come back with advice the Quraysh might not like. He, therefore, addressed the people of the Quraysh: "I have noted what sort of abuse you have poured on the heads of those you have sent to Muḥammad. You know that to me you are

parents and that I am your son. When I heard of your trouble, I gathered those of my people who obeyed my orders and have come to give you support." The Quraysh answered: "This is certainly true, and we have no doubts about you." When he sat down to speak to the Prophet, he said:

> Muḥammad, I have left your people mobilizing their forces. They are swearing that they will never let you reach the Sacred House until you have overwhelmed them. Should there be a fight between you and them, you are faced with one of two eventualities: either you conquer your own people – and we have never heard of any man who has conquered his own people or your soldiers will let you down. Have you gathered this mob to smash your own people? It is the Quraysh you are fighting, and the Quraysh have mobilized even their women and children, and are now in a very determined mood, pledging to God that you will never enter their city. My feeling is that you will be in a very difficult situation tomorrow, when this mob let you down. I certainly recognize no one among them and cannot see that any one of them comes from a respectable background.

At this moment Abū Bakr interrupted him and told him to be more respectful.

As he talked to the Prophet, 'Urwah kept trying to hold the Prophet's beard, following the Arabian habit which indicated a sincere desire to maintain good relations. Al-Mughīrah ibn Shu'bah, a Muslim nephew of 'Urwah, was standing behind the Prophet, holding his sword in his hand and wearing his shield. Every time 'Urwah raised his hand to touch the Prophet's beard, al-Mughīrah hit him with the bottom of his sword on his hand and said: "Keep your hand off the Prophet's face before it is chopped off." 'Urwah did not recognize him, but when he persisted, 'Urwah said: "Confound you – how ill-mannered you are." The Prophet smiled at this demonstration of his Companion's love and respect for him.

'Urwah tried his best to weaken the Prophet's determination to enter Makkah, raising before him the prospect of defeat and counselling him against causing a military conflict. The Prophet assured him that he wanted nothing more than to pay a visit to the Ka'bah in the same way as anyone else could visit it to worship, and was not prevented from so doing. After all, the Ka'bah did not belong to the Quraysh; they were only its custodians and as such they had no right to prevent anyone from worshipping there.

'Urwah did not fail to notice the Muslims' respect for the Prophet. When he went back to the Quraysh he advised them:

> People of the Quraysh, I have seen the Khosroe, the Persian Emperor, and the Caesar of the Byzantine Empire and Negus of Abyssinia, in their respective kingdoms. I swear that I have never seen a king enjoying among his people a similar position to that of Muḥammad among his Companions. They do not fix their eyes when they look at him; they do not raise their voices when they speak to him. He does not need to give more than a signal to any one of them for that man to do what he is bid. I have looked at those people and I have seen that they do not care what may happen to them if they are able to protect their master. Make up your minds. He has made a proposal to you and I counsel you to conclude a peace agreement with him, and to accept his offer. I am giving you my sincere advice and I certainly fear that you will not be able to overcome him.

The Quraysh, however did not like 'Urwah's opinion and were not willing to consider the idea of peace. 'Urwah, therefore, left them with his people and returned to Ṭā'if.

Thus, every envoy the Quraysh sent returned and counselled them to moderate their attitude and allow the Muslims to offer their worship at the Ka'bah. None, however, was able to persuade the Quraysh that its hard-line did not serve its own interest. Motivated by pride and anger, the Quraysh was determined not to give in, whatever the cost.

The Muslims, on the other hand, did not wish to overrun Makkah. That course would result in more bloodshed and a fight against their own people. They stayed calm, hoping that some solution to the problem could still be found.

One report suggests that the Quraysh sent a small force of 40 or 50 men, giving them orders to go around the Muslims' camp and try to take one of the Prophet's Companions prisoner. As it turned out, they were taken prisoner themselves and were brought before the Prophet. He, however, pardoned them and set them free. God mentions in the Qur'ān that He has bestowed calmness on His Messenger and the believers and caused them to abide by the rules of faith and piety. That is the attitude which best becomes them.

The Prophet's Envoy

Considering the situation and the fact that he had received four emissaries from the Quraysh without any sign that the Quraysh were mellowing their opposition to the Muslims' entry to Makkah, the Prophet thought it might be useful to bring some pressure to bear on the Quraysh. He therefore decided to send them an envoy to assure them that his objective was only to worship at the Ka'bah, not to pick a fight with anyone. The envoy was Kharrāsh ibn Umayyah of the tribe of Khuza'ah. As soon as Kharrāsh arrived in Makkah, however, his camel was wounded by the Quraysh people, who also wanted to kill him. He was saved by the Ḥabshī tribe, whose chief al-Ḥulays was one of the Quraysh's envoys to the Prophet. The treatment Kharrāsh received was against the age-honoured traditions of diplomacy, which gave immunity to messengers and envoys. The Prophet, however, did not wish to allow this incident to be an obstacle in his attempt to reach a peaceful solution to the problem. He therefore overlooked the matter and concentrated on maintaining contact with the Quraysh. He thought that sending a more prominent figure from among his Companions might be more useful.

The Prophet first thought of 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb as a suitable messenger. 'Umar, however, pointed out that his own clan, Banī

'Adīy, no longer had any influence in Makkah. No one would protect him should he come to any harm. He suggested that 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān of the Umayyad branch of the Quraysh was better placed to act as the Prophet's ambassador.

Despite the fact that 'Uthmān's clan was very influential in Makkah, he had to go under the protection of his own cousin, Abān ibn Sa'īd ibn al-'Āṣ. Enjoying that protection, he was able to deliver his message, speak to the Quraysh elders and explain to them that the Muslims had come for the purpose of worship only and had no other intention. It was better for the Quraysh, 'Uthmān argued, that they should be seen by the Arabs as faithful to their charge as custodians of the Sacred House. The Quraysh, however, were adamant in their hard-line attitude. The only concession 'Uthmān could get from the Quraysh was that they allowed him to do the *ṭawāf* should he so desire. He made it clear to them that under the circumstances, he would not do so until the Prophet had done his own *ṭawāf*.

'Uthmān's discussions with the Quraysh leaders were prolonged and he was in Makkah for three days. Moreover, he was apparently able to contact some people from among the Quraysh who had adopted Islam and remained in Makkah, keeping the fact of their conversion to Islam a secret. Apparently there were quite a few of these people, who yearned for the day when they would be able to declare their stand and enjoy freedom of faith. 'Uthmān carried a message from the Prophet to them telling them that victory would be coming soon. They were greatly encouraged by that message and requested 'Uthmān to give the Prophet their respects and to tell him, on their behalf, that they believed that God, Who had enabled him to encamp at al-Ḥudaybiyah, was able to open the gates of Makkah for him.

Some reports suggest that 'Uthmān was arrested by the Quraysh when it discovered that he had made these contacts with the Qurayshi Muslims. Indeed, a rumour began to spread that 'Uthmān was killed. It did not take long before this rumour was heard in the Muslim camp. 'Uthmān's prolonged absence could only lend credence to that rumour. Receiving no indication to the contrary,

the Prophet concluded that the report of 'Uthmān's death was correct. The treatment which was meted out to his first envoy, Kharrāsh ibn Umayyah, served as supporting evidence. He felt that the situation had reached a stage where tolerance could only be counter-productive.

A Pledge to Fight and Die

Deeply hurt and very sad, the Prophet felt that by killing 'Uthmān, his Companion and envoy, the Quraysh had closed the door on all efforts which aimed at reaching a peaceful settlement. The other alternative was the one which he had tried hard to avoid: namely, war. He called on his Companions to give him a pledge to fight the Quraysh to the bitter end. He was standing underneath a tree when he requested that pledge, and his Companions rushed to give him what he asked of them. Every one of them pledged that he would fight and never flee from battle even if that meant his own death. The Prophet was pleased with his Companions' responses. He also made a pledge on behalf of 'Uthmān: "'Uthmān is on a mission given him by God and His Messenger. I, therefore, make a pledge on his behalf." He clasped his hands together and said: "This is for 'Uthmān." In comment on this pledge, the Qur'ān says: "*God was indeed well pleased with the believers when they pledged their allegiance to you under the tree. He knew what was in their hearts and so He sent down tranquillity upon them, and rewarded them with a speedy victory and with many war gains for them to take. God is Almighty, Wise.*" (48: 18–19)

That pledge is known in Islamic history books as Bay'at al-Riḍwān, or 'the pledge earning God's pleasure', in view of the clear statement that God was pleased with those who took part in it. Indeed, the pledge warmed the Prophet's heart, since it was yet another demonstration that his Companions were always prepared to render whatever sacrifice they were called upon to make in defence of the cause of Islam. Those Companions of the Prophet realized that numerically the Quraysh were far superior to them. Besides, when they started their journey, they did not bring their

war equipment with them. War was completely absent from their minds. None of them wore body armour or carried it with him. They carried only the minimum armament which was absolutely necessary for travelling in the desert of Arabia: their swords in their sheaths. Their pledge meant, in effect, that they were determined to face the far superior strength of the Quraysh, on the Quraysh's own ground with swords only, leaving no room for withdrawal or escape. They were fully aware of what they had pledged to do. When they were subsequently asked about the terms of their pledge and what it entailed, their answer was: 'Death'. Such a pledge, readily given and sincerely meant, would definitely earn God's pleasure, as those people had definitely earned it. Jābir ibn 'Abdullāh, a Companion of the Prophet who took part in that pledge, said: "The Prophet (peace be upon him) told us on the day of al-Ḥudaybiyah: You are the best people on earth."

We should stress here a small but significant point about that tree beneath which the pledge was given. The tree was subsequently cut down and the place where it used to stand was forgotten. This is certainly good for Islam. Had it survived, people who are quick to give exaggerated significance to places and to things associated with historical events might have raised a monument in its place or built a mosque or some other building on that site and made it a shrine to visit. Islam does not recognize the sanctity of any such place or object. Had it been allowed to survive, the tree might have acquired, with the passage of time, more significance than the event which took place beneath it. The tree, however, is immaterial, while the pledge itself remains a lesson for every Muslim.

Shortly after the pledge was made, 'Uthmān arrived to give the Prophet an account of his mission. His arrival took the heat off the situation. The Prophet was very pleased to see him alive but was not happy to learn of the Quraysh's adamant attitude. He reflected on the situation, trying to assess the choices open to him.

The Quraysh, on the other hand, heard of the pledge given by the Muslims to the Prophet. Their chiefs were engaged in high level consultations. They realized that the Muslims' pledge meant that their determination to achieve their purpose was not

in doubt. Past experience suggested that should the two sides be engaged in a military conflict, the outcome might very well be a victory for the Muslims, despite their relatively small numbers and poor equipment. That the Muslims could always be relied upon to fight hard and well and not to weaken in the face of adversity was something not to be doubted. Now that they had given the Prophet such a clear commitment to fight to the bitter end, the Muslims would not just go away. Moreover, the Quraysh might not have been fully convinced that they acted within their rights when they tried to prevent the Muslims from worshipping at the Ka'bah. Their motives were nothing more than pride of position and conceit. Hence, the Quraysh realized that they must think seriously of the consequences, especially if the military conflict went against them.

A Delegation for Peace

Some wiser men among the Quraysh must have suggested that achieving a peaceful settlement might preserve the Quraysh's dignity better than war, even if the war ended in its favour. The views of its earlier envoys – particularly those of al-Ḥulays of the Ḥabshī tribe and 'Urwah ibn Mas'ūd of the Thaqīf – began to appear highly valid. Moreover, should the Quraysh push matters to the point of flare-up, their action might mean a fight near the Sacred House and in the sacred month. This would, in effect, be setting a precedent which was certain to do more harm than good to the Quraysh. Hence the arguments for moderation suddenly began to appear much weightier. A delegation headed by Suhayl ibn 'Amr was, therefore, dispatched to negotiate the terms of a peace settlement with the Prophet.

The Prophet received Suhayl ibn 'Amr and his delegation well. He instructed his Companions to show their sacrificial animals and to raise their voices with phrases expressing the fact that they had come only in response to God's call to honour the Sacred House.

The talks between the two sides were not easy. Despite the fact that the Prophet was keen to achieve a peace settlement, the

negotiations had to deal with several issues of substance. The topics included: the Prophet's visit to the Sacred House; the Quraysh's determination not to seem to have given in to force; the possibility of agreeing a long term truce between the two sides, putting an end to their frequent military clashes; the sort of relations which should exist between the two sides; and the freedom of each side to make political moves on the wider horizon of the whole of Arabia.

There was, however, no reason to prolong the discussions. The Prophet accepted all the Quraysh's conditions readily. It was Suhayl ibn 'Amr who took a long time in his presentation of each of those conditions and what each of them entailed. Indeed, the Quraysh side were surprised that all their conditions were accepted by the Prophet without too much trouble. It was necessary, however, to write the agreement down and to have it signed by representatives of both sides.

Unease in the Muslim Camp

The Prophet's attitude caused a stir in the Muslim camp. They were not used to seeing the Prophet taking such a very soft attitude. It was also surprising for the Quraysh negotiators themselves. Not only did the Prophet accept all the terms the Quraysh stipulated, he did not consult his Companions in the matter, contrary to his normal practice. Moreover, the terms of the peace agreement were extremely surprising to the Muslims, because they tended to cast the Muslim side as much weaker than the Quraysh. To the Muslims, accepting such terms was neither useful nor necessary. Some of them could not hide their dissatisfaction. This is epitomized by the attitude of 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb. When the terms of the peace agreement were finalized and were about to be written down, 'Umar came to Abū Bakr and said: "Abū Bakr, is he not God's Messenger?" Abū Bakr answered in the affirmative. 'Umar again asked: "Are we not the Muslims?" When Abū Bakr gave the same answer, 'Umar went on: "Are they not the idolaters?" Abū Bakr again answered: "Yes." 'Umar then asked him: "Why then should we accept humiliation in matters of our faith?" Abū Bakr

answered with a piece of advice, saying to his questioner: "Follow him whatever he does, 'Umar. I believe that he is God's Messenger." But 'Umar was still perturbed and said: "And I too believe that he is God's Messenger."

'Umar's argument was that since what separated the two sides was really a single issue – right against wrong, faith against lack of faith – those who were on the side of right and truth must not give in to those who championed the cause of wrong and falsehood. The believers must never accept any sort of humiliation when it came to matters relating to faith. Indeed, they should always show pride in their religion. Hence, 'Umar was not to be deterred. He went to the Prophet and put to him the same questions: "Are you not God's Messenger? Are we not the Muslims? Are they not the idolaters?" To all these questions, the Prophet answered in the affirmative. The final question 'Umar put was again the same: "Why, then, should we accept humiliation in matters of our faith?"

The Prophet's answer provided the clue to his attitude: "I am God's servant and Messenger. I shall not disobey Him and He will never abandon me." The Prophet was indeed following Divine orders which he must have received at that time.

The Prophet then called in 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib to write down the peace agreement so that it might be signed by both sides. Again, Suhayl ibn 'Amr showed maximum rigidity, while the Prophet showed complete flexibility.

The Prophet told 'Alī to write: "In the name of God, the Merciful, the Beneficent." Suhayl interrupted: "I do not know this. Write down: 'In your name, Our Lord'." The Prophet told 'Alī to write the phrase Suhayl proposed. He continued with his dictation: "These are the terms of the peace agreement negotiated between Muḥammad, God's Messenger, and Suhayl ibn 'Amr." Again, Suhayl interrupted: "Had I accepted that you are God's Messenger, I would not have fought you. You have to write down your name and your father's name." The Prophet accepted Suhayl's point and revised his dictation, telling 'Alī to write:

These are the terms of the peace agreed by Muḥammad ibn 'Abdullāh and Suhayl ibn 'Amr.

- Both have agreed to a complete truce for a period of ten years, during which all people will enjoy peace and security and will not attack one another.
- Moreover, if anyone from the Quraysh joins Muḥammad without permission from his guardian or chief, he shall be returned to the Quraysh.
- If anyone from those in the camp of Muḥammad joins the Quraysh, they are not required to return him.
- Both sides agree that they harbour good intentions towards each other.
- No theft or treachery shall be condoned.
- Whoever wishes to enter into an alliance with Muḥammad may do so, and whoever wants to enter into an alliance with the Quraysh may do so.
- It is further agreed that you, Muḥammad, shall return home this year without entering Makkah. At the end of one year, we shall evacuate Makkah for you so that you may enter it with your followers to stay for three days only. You shall carry only the armament necessary for a traveller – namely, your swords in their sheaths. You shall not carry any other arms.

A Hard Test of Muslim Intentions

These were the terms of the peace agreement. When they were written down, witnesses from both sides were asked to sign the document. At that moment, something happened to test the patience of the believers and to give them another opportunity to prove the strength of their faith. A man from Makkah arrived in handcuffs and with his legs in chains. He was being kept prisoner there because he was a Muslim. This man was none other than Suhayl's own son, Abū Jandal. It was his father who imprisoned

him and fastened his shackles. Nevertheless, he had been able to escape and to take an unfamiliar route through the mountains surrounding Makkah until he arrived at al-Ḥudaybiyah. When the Muslims saw him, they were very glad that he had escaped and gave him a fine reception.

While the peace agreement was being written down, Suhayl was too busy to notice anything. When it was finished, Suhayl looked up and saw his son among the Muslims. He went up to him, hit him in the face and took him by the collar. Abū Jandal cried aloud: "My fellow Muslims, am I to be returned to the unbelievers to try to turn me away from my faith?" Those words were very painful to the Muslims, some of whom started to cry.

Suhayl ibn 'Amr, however, was unmoved. He said to God's Messenger: "This is the first person whose case I take up. You must return him to me." The Prophet referred to the fact that Abū Jandal arrived before the agreement was completed: "We have not finished drawing up the document yet." Suhayl said: "Then I have not agreed any terms with you whatsoever." The Prophet pleaded: "Then allow me him."

Suhayl said that he would not. Mikraz, another member of the Quraysh delegation, said that they should allow Muḥammad to have Abū Jandal. The father was adamant and refused all appeals to let his son join the Muslims. He went even further and began to hit his son with a thorny branch of a tree. The Prophet again pleaded with him to let his son go, or at least not to torture him. But Suhayl would accept nothing. Some of Suhayl's friends, however, extended their protection to Abū Jandal and his father stopped hitting him. The Prophet explained to Abū Jandal his inability to help him, speaking to him in a loud voice so that he could hear: "Abū Jandal, be patient and endure your situation for God's sake. He will certainly provide for you and those who are suffering with you a way out of your hardship. We have made a peace agreement with those people, giving them a pledge by God that we will be faithful to the terms of our agreement. We shall not violate our pledges."

Kill Your Father

'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb was again outraged by the situation. He could not understand why the Muslims should accept such humiliating terms or stand idle when a brother of theirs was subjected to harsh treatment for no reason other than the fact that he believed in God and His Messenger. As Abū Jandal was being led away, 'Umar went up to him and walked by his side. He spoke to him: "Be patient, Abū Jandal. These people are unbelievers. They are worthless. The blood of anyone of them is no more precious than the blood of a dog."

As he was walking by Abū Jandal's side and talking to him, he continued to move the handle of his sword towards Abū Jandal, hoping that Abū Jandal would take 'Umar's sword and kill his father. Abū Jandal either did not wish to kill his father or did not understand or notice 'Umar's gesture. He submitted to his fortune until God would help him get his release. He was led away in his shackles and chains. As the Muslims looked at him, their hearts were full of agony because they were unable to help him.

When the document detailing the peace terms was written down, the Prophet asked a number of his Companions to witness the agreement, in addition to witnesses from the Quraysh side. The Muslim witnesses were Abū Bakr, 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn 'Awf, Sa'd ibn Abī Waqqāṣ, Maḥmūd ibn Maslamah and 'Abdullāh ibn Suhayl, another son of the chief Quraysh negotiator himself. Mikraz ibn Ḥafṣ and Ḥuwayṭib ibn 'Abd al-'Uzzā were the Quraysh witnesses. When the witnessing was finally done, the Quraysh delegation went home.

This peace was supposed to last for ten years. Very few Muslims were able to bring themselves to accept it without experiencing a feeling of unease. What added to their bitterness was the fact that the terms of the agreement meant that they had to go back home without being able to fulfil their purpose of worshipping at the Ka'bah. It should be remembered that the Prophet and his Companions were in *iḥrām*, the state of consecration, having left Madīnah in order to perform the *'Umrah*. They were first prevented

from entering Makkah by the declared intention of the Quraysh to use force to stop them. Now they were prevented by the terms of the agreement which they signed with the Quraysh. They were, in effect, in the position of a *muḥṣar*, a person who sets out from home to do his pilgrimage or *'Umrah* but is unable to reach his destination owing to some reason beyond his control. God declares in the Qur'ān that such a person can release himself from *iḥrām* by slaughtering a sheep or some other sacrificial animal at the point where he cannot continue his journey.

Cancellation of Intended Worship

The Prophet said to his Companions: "Slaughter your animals and shave and release yourselves from *iḥrām*." No one showed any sign of willingness to comply with this order. The Prophet repeated his command three times and still no one was willing to do as he was told. The Prophet was very angry indeed. He went into his tent where Umm Salamah, his wife who accompanied him on this expedition, was waiting. She immediately noticed how angry he was. She asked him the reason why and he answered: "The Muslims are ruining themselves. I have given them a command and they have not obeyed." He explained to her how his Companions received his orders with indifference and how not one of them was willing to obey. She tried to pacify him: "Messenger of God, do not blame them. They have been under great pressure because of all the trouble you have taken to achieve this peace settlement and because they now realize that they have to take the long way home without achieving their purpose." She then gave him a very sound piece of advice: she told him to go out and slaughter his own sacrificial animals and shave, without speaking to any one of them. The Prophet acted on his wife's advice and went out and slaughtered his camels. He then called someone to shave his head. When his Companions witnessed what he did, they rushed to do likewise. Some of them helped others to shave and they were extremely unhappy with themselves for not responding to the Prophet's orders in the first place.

> Not all of the Muslims at al-Ḥudaybiyah shaved their heads: some of them just cut their hair. The Prophet said: "May God have mercy on those who have shaved." Some of his Companions said: "Messenger of God, what about those who have cut their hair?" He answered by repeating the same prayer: "May God have mercy on those who have shaved." The same question about those who had cut their hair was put to him, but he answered by repeating the same prayer a third time. Once more, he was asked about the other group and the Prophet included them in his prayers, saying: "And those who have cut their hair." When he was asked the reason for repeating his prayers for mercy to the shavers three times before he included the other group, he answered: "They have entertained no doubt."[4]

Al-Zuhrī reports: "The Prophet then began his journey home. On the way back to Madīnah, the Prophet received new revelations – the *sūrah* entitled *al-Fatḥ*, or Victory. Imām Aḥmad reports on the authority of Mujammi' ibn Ḥārithah, an Anṣārī who had learnt the Qur'ān: "We were with the Prophet at al-Ḥudaybiyah. When we were on the way back, we noticed that people were agitating their camels. People began to ask what was going on. They learnt that the Prophet received a new revelation. We approached him feeling very apprehensive. We saw the Prophet on his camel at Kirā' al-Ghamīm. When people assembled, he read to them the *Sūrah al-Fatḥ*, starting with, '*We have granted you a glorious victory.*' One of his Companions asked him: 'Is it a victory, Messenger of God?' He replied: 'Yes indeed. By Him who holds my soul in His hand, it is a grand victory.'"

Imām Aḥmad relates a report by 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb: "We were with God's Messenger on an expedition. I asked him about something three times, but he did not reply to me. I thought that I had done badly. I mounted my camel and went ahead, apprehensive that something might be revealed to the Prophet concerning me. Soon someone called me by name. I went back to the Prophet fearing what might have been revealed. The Prophet said to me: "A *sūrah* has been revealed to me

4. Ibid., pp. 500–516.

last night, and it is much dearer to me than the whole world and all it contains: '*We have granted you a glorious victory, so that God may forgive you all your faults, past and future.*'" (Also related by al-Bukhārī, al-Nasā'ī and al-Tirmidhī quoting Imām Mālik.)

The General Atmosphere

Such was the atmosphere in the Muslim community prior to the revelation of this *sūrah*. The Prophet was certain of what God had inspired him. Therefore, he allowed himself no say in the drift of events other than what such divine inspiration pointed to. He referred to this inspiration at every point and before taking any step. Neither the unbelievers nor pressure by his Companions, who were infuriated by the unbelievers' hostility, would make him change his course. Eventually, God put tranquillity in the Muslims' hearts and they were reassured, accepting without hesitation what the Prophet told them, just like their brethren who never entertained any doubt in the first place. The prime example of these was Abū Bakr whose reassurance was never in doubt, not even for a brief moment.

Hence the opening of the *sūrah* gives the Prophet happy news that greatly delights his heart: "*We have granted you a glorious victory, so that God may forgive you all your faults, past and future, bestow upon you the full measure of His blessings and guide you on a straight way. God will certainly grant you His mighty support.*" (Verses 1–3) The opening also refers to the tranquillity granted to the believers, acknowledging that they were true believers and promising them forgiveness of sins, reward and support from on high: "*It is He who sent down tranquillity into the hearts of the believers, so that they may grow more firm in their faith. To God belongs all the forces of the heavens and the earth; He is indeed All-Knowing, Wise. He will admit the believers, both men and women, into gardens through which running waters flow, there to abide, and He will forgive them their bad deeds. That is, in God's sight, a great triumph.*" (Verses 4–5) By contrast, their enemies, hypocrites and idolaters alike, incur God's displeasure and suffering in the life to come: "*God will also inflict suffering on the hypocrites and the polytheists, men and women, who harbour evil thoughts about God. Evil encompasses them from all sides, and*

they incur God's anger. He has rejected them and has prepared for them hell, an evil destination." (Verse 6)

The *sūrah* also notes the pledge the believers gave to the Prophet, considering it a pledge to God. Thus, it establishes a direct relation between the believers and their Lord, the Eternal: "*We have sent you [Muḥammad] as a witness, a bearer of good news and a warner so that you [people] may believe in God and His Messenger, support Him, honour Him and extol His limitless glory morning and evening. Those who pledge their allegiance to you are actually pledging their allegiance to God: God's hand is over their hands. He who breaks his pledge does so to his own detriment, but to the one who fulfils his pledge to Him, God will grant a rich reward."* (Verses 8–10)

Before completing the discussion of the believers' attitude at al-Ḥudaybiyah, the *sūrah* refers, within the context of unkept pledges, to the desert Arabs who stayed behind and did not join the Prophet on this expedition. It shows their excuses to be unfounded and exposes their ill thoughts about God and their expectation that the Prophet and his Companions would encounter disaster. It directs the Prophet as to the attitude he should adopt towards them in future. The style here emphasizes the believers' strength and the weakness of those who stayed behind. It makes it clear that the Muslims would soon be able to make rich war gains, all of which would be coveted by those who were too slow to join the Prophet on this expedition: "*The desert Arabs who stayed behind will say to you, 'Our property and our families kept us busy; do then ask God to forgive us.' Thus they say with their tongues what is not in their hearts. Say: 'Who, then, can avert from you anything that God might have willed, whether it be His will to harm you or to confer a benefit on you? No! God is fully aware of what you do.' No! You thought that the Messenger and the believers would never return to their families and this thought seemed pleasing to your hearts. You entertained such evil thoughts because you have always been devoid of goodness. As for those who will not believe in God and His Messenger, We have prepared a blazing fire for the unbelievers. To God belongs the dominion over the heavens and the earth. He forgives whoever He will and punishes whoever He will. God is much-forgiving, ever merciful. When you set forth on a course that promises war gains, those who previously stayed behind will say: "Let us come with*

you." They thus seek to alter God's words. Say: "You shall not come with us. God has already said so." They will then say: "You begrudge us [our share]." How little they understand. Say to the desert Arabs who stayed behind: "You will be called upon to fight against a people of great prowess in war: you will have to fight them unless they surrender. If you obey, God will reward you well; but if you turn away as you have done before, He will inflict on you painful suffering." (Verses 11–16)

Within the same context, the *sūrah* tells us about those who have genuine excuses, justifying their staying behind. These are they who have some disability or illness that prevents their participation in war: "*No blame attaches to the blind, nor does blame attach to the lame, nor does blame attach to the sick. Whoever obeys God and His Messenger shall be admitted by Him into gardens through which running waters flow; but the one who turns away will He severely punish.*" (Verse 17)

The *sūrah* turns again to the believers, their thoughts and attitudes. It refers to them in a way that is full of honour and acceptance, delighting them with good news of what was soon to happen, praising their firm belief and readiness to sacrifice themselves for God's cause. We see here that God puts this select group of people under His direct care, bestowing on them His goodly acceptance and strengthening them in their noble attitude. He tells them in person that He in His glory was a witness with them as they offered their pledges at a particular spot, under the tree. He was certainly aware of their inner thoughts and feelings, was pleased with them and ensured that they would soon achieve victory that would yield great gains, relating this to God's law that operates throughout the universe. This is indeed a great and remarkable event witnessed by the whole universe: "*God was indeed well pleased with the believers when they pledged their allegiance to you under the tree. He knew what was in their hearts and so He sent down tranquillity upon them, and rewarded them with a speedy victory, and with many war gains for them to take. God is Almighty, Wise. God has promised you [people] many war gains that you shall achieve. He has hastened this gain for you and He has held back the hands of hostile people from you, so that this may become a sign for the believers. He will guide you on a straight way. There are still other gains to come, which are still beyond your power. God has full control over them. God has power over all things. Were the unbelievers to fight you,*

they would have turned their back in flight. They shall find none to protect or support them. Such was God's way which operated in the past; and never will you find any change in God's way." (Verses 18–23)

The *sūrah* reminds the believers of God's grace as He stopped their enemies who were intent upon fighting them, denouncing those same enemies who prevented their entry into the Sacred Mosque, and refusing to allow their sacrificial animals to reach their place of slaughter. It reveals to them God's wisdom as He stopped conflict that year, and His grace in making what happened acceptable to them, bestowing tranquillity on them. All this was for a purpose unknown to them but known to God. It was the much better and greater prospect of bringing Makkah into the Islamic fold and making Islam prevail over all religions. All this was according to God's design and by His will: "*It is He who, in the valley of Makkah, stayed their hands from you, and your hands from them, after He gave you the advantage over them. God sees all that you do. They were the ones who disbelieved, and who debarred you from the Sacred Mosque and prevented your offering from reaching its place of sacrifice. Had it not been for the fact that there were among them believing men and women unknown to you and whom you might have unwittingly trampled underfoot, and on whose account you would have unwittingly incurred guilt... God will admit to His grace whomever He wills. Had they stood apart, We would have inflicted on the unbelievers among them truly painful suffering. The unbelievers fanned fury in their hearts, the fury of ignorance. Meanwhile, God sent down tranquillity on His Messenger and on the believers, and made the word of piety binding on them. They were most worthy of it and deserved it well. God has full knowledge of all things. God has shown the truth in His Messenger's true vision: most certainly you shall enter the Sacred Mosque, if God so wills, in full security, with your heads shaved or your hair cut short, without fear. God knew what you did not, and He granted you, besides this, a speedy victory. It is He who sent His Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth so as to make it prevail over all religions. Sufficient is God as a witness.*" (Verses 24–28)

The *sūrah* concludes with an outline highlighting the special characteristics of this select group of humanity, the Prophet's Companions. It refers to their description in the Torah and the Gospel and emphasizes God's promise to them of forgiveness of their sins and

granting them rich reward: "*Muḥammad is God's Messenger; and those who are with him are firm and unyielding towards the unbelievers, full of mercy towards one another. You can see them bowing down, prostrating in prayer, seeking favour with God and His good pleasure. They bear on their faces the marks of their prostrations. This is how they are pictured in the Torah and the Gospel: they are like a seed that brings forth its shoot, strengthens it, grows thick and stands firm on its stem, delighting the sowers. Through them God will enrage the unbelievers. To those of them who believe and do righteous deeds God has promised forgiveness and a rich reward.*" (Verse 29)

Thus the *sūrah* gives a full image of the situation that led to its revelation. It does not relate the events in their chronological order, but highlights the lessons that must be learnt, linking individual events to their permanent rules, and special attitudes to the overall universal system. As always in the Qur'ān, it is hearts and minds that are addressed in a highly inspiring way.

A Community Attains Maturity

Looking at the *sūrah* as a whole and comparing it to the one that precedes it in the Qur'ānic order reveals the profound change in the general attitude of the Muslim community over the three years we believe to have separated the revelation of these two *sūrahs*. We realize the effects the Qur'ān had on that community and how it benefited by the careful education the Prophet imparted to it, enabling it to assume its unique position and play its unparalleled role in human history.

It is clear from the general ambience of this *sūrah* and the feelings it generates that the Muslim community had attained maturity, achieved a coherently high standard of faith, become reassured about its duties and no longer needed strong incentives in order to discharge such duties that required sacrificing life and property. It now needed a restraining influence so that it could look at things calmly and accept the decision of the Highest Leadership of the Islamic message to observe a temporary truce in its confrontation with the enemy.

No longer does the Muslim community need a directive of the type: "*Therefore, do not lose heart or sue for peace. It is you who have the upper hand, and God is with you. He will never let your deeds go to waste.*" (47: 35)

or an admonition like: "*You are called upon to give in God's cause, but some among you will turn out to be niggardly. Whoever is niggardly [in God's cause] is niggardly towards himself. God is the source of all wealth, whereas you are the ones in need. If you turn away, He will substitute other people for you, and they will not be like you.*" (47: 38) Nor was there any more need to provide incentives to fight for God's cause by speaking about the nobility of martyrdom and the great honour God grants to martyrs. We do not have here any exposition of the purpose of putting the Muslim community to the test by imposing a duty to fight for God's cause, as we have in the preceding *sūrah*, Muḥammad: "*Had God so willed, He could have punished them Himself, but it is His will that He tests you all by means of one another. And as for those who are slain in God's cause, never will He let their deeds go to waste. He will grant them guidance, and bring them to a happy state, and will admit them to the Garden He has already made known to them.*" (47: 4–6)

By contrast, the discourse in the present *sūrah* highlights the tranquillity God placed in the believers' hearts, or bestowed on them, to restrain them from being over zealous. It also reassures them that what took place was by God's command, referring to the Prophet's wisdom as he opted for a lenient and conciliatory approach. It speaks of God's pleasure with those who offered their pledges to the Prophet under the tree, and paints at the end a bright picture of the Muslim community under the Prophet's leadership.

The *sūrah* certainly speaks of the need to fulfil the pledges given to the Prophet and threatens those who go back on their pledges: "*Those who pledge their allegiance to you are actually pledging their allegiance to God: God's hand is over their hands. He who breaks his pledge does so to his own detriment; but to the one who fulfils his pledge to Him, God will grant a rich reward.*" (Verse 10) Clearly the reference here is one of honour to those giving their pledges to the Prophet, emphasizing the seriousness of the pledge. Reference to breaking such pledges occurs in respect of the desert Arabs who stayed behind. The same consideration applies to the hypocrites, men and women. This reference in the *sūrah* is made in passing, indicating the weakness of this group as compared with the entire Muslim community which had purged its ranks and attained maturity. This reference is very quick, unlike what we have in

the preceding *sūrah*, Muḥammad, where the discussion of the hypocrites and their Jewish allies occupies a large part of it. This is yet another development in the external attitude of the Muslim community, one that is in harmony with the developments taking place within it.

There is also in the *sūrah* clear evidence of the strength of the Muslim community in relation to the strength of the unbelievers. This is evident in the *sūrah* as a whole and in specific verses. Other verses point out that further victories were to be achieved, making those who stayed behind eager to join the Muslims in order to share the promised war gains. The reference to the fact that Islam would prevail over all other religions is also indicative of the increasing strength of the Muslim community in the period separating the revelation of these two *sūrahs* that occur consecutively in the Qur'ānic order.

There was, then, a clear change in people's hearts, the overall condition of the Muslim community and the situation it was facing. This change can easily be recognized when we follow the events during the Prophet's lifetime as discussed in the Qur'ān. The change reflects the effects of the Qur'ānic approach to the type of education the Muslim community should undergo and the method the Prophet followed in effecting that education. That happy community of the Prophet's Companions was unique in history. However, the change has a telling lesson for those who are in the position of leadership of human communities. They must never become fed up with human weakness, or with what may linger on of past habits, influences of social environment, worldly desire and lack of motivation. All these may have strong effects at first, but persistence, patience and a wise approach ensure steady progress. Moreover, tests and experience are bound to produce their effects when they are utilized to reinforce educational efforts. Gradually, weaknesses dwindle and disappear and believers begin to aspire to higher horizons. They are able to see the superb light emanating from on High. In God's Messenger we have a great shining example to follow. In the Qur'ān we have guidance about the right path to take.

I

A Victory in the Making

Al-Fatḥ (Victory)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

We have granted you a glorious victory, (1)

so that God may forgive you all your faults, past and future, bestow upon you the full measure of His blessings and guide you on a straight way. (2)

God will certainly grant you His mighty support. (3)

It is He who sent down tranquillity into the hearts of the believers, so that they may grow more firm in their faith. To God belongs all the forces of the heavens and the earth; He is indeed All-Knowing, Wise. (4)

إِنَّا فَتَحْنَا لَكَ فَتْحًا مُّبِينًا ﴿١﴾

لِّيَغْفِرَ لَكَ ٱللَّهُ مَا تَقَدَّمَ مِن ذَنۢبِكَ
وَمَا تَأَخَّرَ وَيُتِمَّ نِعْمَتَهُۥ عَلَيْكَ
وَيَهْدِيَكَ صِرَٰطًا مُّسْتَقِيمًا ﴿٢﴾

وَيَنصُرَكَ ٱللَّهُ نَصْرًا عَزِيزًا ﴿٣﴾

هُوَ ٱلَّذِىٓ أَنزَلَ ٱلسَّكِينَةَ فِى قُلُوبِ
ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ لِيَزْدَادُوٓا۟ إِيمَٰنًا مَّعَ إِيمَٰنِهِمْ
وَلِلَّهِ جُنُودُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ
وَكَانَ ٱللَّهُ عَلِيمًا حَكِيمًا ﴿٤﴾

He will admit the believers, both men and women, into gardens through which running waters flow, there to abide, and He will forgive them their bad deeds. That is, in God's sight, a great triumph. (5)

لِّيُدْخِلَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتِ جَنَّاتٍ
تَجْرِي مِن تَحْتِهَا الْأَنْهَارُ خَالِدِينَ فِيهَا
وَيُكَفِّرَ عَنْهُمْ سَيِّئَاتِهِمْ ۚ وَكَانَ
ذَٰلِكَ عِندَ اللَّهِ فَوْزًا عَظِيمًا ﴿٥﴾

God will also inflict suffering on the hypocrites and the polytheists, men and women, who harbour evil thoughts about God. Evil encompasses them from all sides, and they incur God's anger. He has rejected them and has prepared for them hell, an evil destination. (6)

وَيُعَذِّبَ الْمُنَافِقِينَ وَالْمُنَافِقَاتِ
وَالْمُشْرِكِينَ وَالْمُشْرِكَاتِ الظَّانِّينَ
بِاللَّهِ ظَنَّ السَّوْءِ ۚ عَلَيْهِمْ دَائِرَةُ السَّوْءِ ۖ
وَغَضِبَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَعَنَهُمْ وَأَعَدَّ
لَهُمْ جَهَنَّمَ ۖ وَسَاءَتْ مَصِيرًا ﴿٦﴾

To God belongs all the forces of the heavens and the earth; He is indeed Almighty, Wise. (7)

وَلِلَّهِ جُنُودُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ ۚ وَكَانَ
اللَّهُ عَزِيزًا حَكِيمًا ﴿٧﴾

We have sent you [Muḥammad] as a witness, a bearer of good news and a warner (8)

إِنَّا أَرْسَلْنَاكَ شَاهِدًا وَمُبَشِّرًا
وَنَذِيرًا ﴿٨﴾

so that you [people] may believe in God and His Messenger, support Him, honour Him and extol His limitless glory morning and evening. (9)

لِّتُؤْمِنُوا بِاللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ وَتُعَزِّرُوهُ
وَتُوَقِّرُوهُ وَتُسَبِّحُوهُ بُكْرَةً
وَأَصِيلًا ﴿٩﴾

Those who pledge their allegiance to you are actually pledging their allegiance to God: God's hand is over their hands. He who breaks his pledge does so to his own detriment; but to the one who fulfils his pledge to Him, God will grant a rich reward. (10)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ يُبَايِعُونَكَ إِنَّمَا يُبَايِعُونَ
ٱللَّهَ يَدُ ٱللَّهِ فَوْقَ أَيْدِيهِمْ ۚ فَمَن نَّكَثَ
فَإِنَّمَا يَنكُثُ عَلَىٰ نَفْسِهِۦ ۖ وَمَنْ أَوْفَىٰ
بِمَا عَٰهَدَ عَلَيْهُ ٱللَّهَ فَسَيُؤْتِيهِ أَجْرًا
عَظِيمًا ﴿١٠﴾

The desert Arabs who stayed behind will say to you, 'Our property and our families kept us busy; do then ask God to forgive us.' Thus they say with their tongues what is not in their hearts. Say: 'Who, then, can avert from you anything that God might have willed, whether it be His will to harm you or to confer a benefit on you? No! God is fully aware of what you do.' (11)

سَيَقُولُ لَكَ ٱلْمُخَلَّفُونَ مِنَ ٱلْأَعْرَابِ
شَغَلَتْنَآ أَمْوَٰلُنَا وَأَهْلُونَا فَٱسْتَغْفِرْ لَنَا ۚ
يَقُولُونَ بِأَلْسِنَتِهِم مَّا لَيْسَ فِى قُلُوبِهِمْ ۚ
قُلْ فَمَن يَمْلِكُ لَكُم مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ شَيْـًٔا إِنْ
أَرَادَ بِكُمْ ضَرًّا أَوْ أَرَادَ بِكُمْ نَفْعًۢا ۚ بَلْ كَانَ
ٱللَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ خَبِيرًا ﴿١١﴾

No! You thought that the Messenger and the believers would never return to their families and this thought seemed pleasing to your hearts. You entertained such evil thoughts because you have always been devoid of goodness. (12)

بَلْ ظَنَنتُمْ أَن لَّن يَنقَلِبَ ٱلرَّسُولُ
وَٱلْمُؤْمِنُونَ إِلَىٰٓ أَهْلِيهِمْ أَبَدًا وَزُيِّنَ
ذَٰلِكَ فِى قُلُوبِكُمْ وَظَنَنتُمْ ظَنَّ
ٱلسَّوْءِ وَكُنتُمْ قَوْمًۢا بُورًا ﴿١٢﴾

As for those who will not believe in God and His Messenger, We have prepared a blazing fire for the unbelievers. (13)

وَمَن لَّمْ يُؤْمِنۢ بِٱللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِۦ فَإِنَّآ
أَعْتَدْنَا لِلْكَٰفِرِينَ سَعِيرًا ﴿١٣﴾

To God belongs the dominion over the heavens and the earth. He forgives whoever He will and punishes whoever He will. God is much-forgiving, ever merciful. (14)

وَلِلَّهِ مُلْكُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ ۚ يَغْفِرُ لِمَنْ يَشَاءُ وَيُعَذِّبُ مَنْ يَشَاءُ ۚ وَكَانَ اللَّهُ غَفُورًا رَحِيمًا ﴿١٤﴾

When you set forth on a course that promises war gains, those who previously stayed behind will say: "Let us come with you." They thus seek to alter God's words. Say: "You shall not come with us. God has already said so." They will then say: "You begrudge us [our share]." How little they understand. (15)

سَيَقُولُ الْمُخَلَّفُونَ إِذَا انْطَلَقْتُمْ إِلَىٰ مَغَانِمَ لِتَأْخُذُوهَا ذَرُونَا نَتَّبِعْكُمْ ۖ يُرِيدُونَ أَنْ يُبَدِّلُوا كَلَامَ اللَّهِ ۚ قُلْ لَنْ تَتَّبِعُونَا كَذَٰلِكُمْ قَالَ اللَّهُ مِنْ قَبْلُ ۖ فَسَيَقُولُونَ بَلْ تَحْسُدُونَنَا ۚ بَلْ كَانُوا لَا يَفْقَهُونَ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا ﴿١٥﴾

Say to the desert Arabs who stayed behind: "You will be called upon to fight against a people of great prowess in war: you will have to fight them unless they surrender. If you obey, God will reward you well; but if you turn away as you have done before, He will inflict on you painful suffering." (16)

قُلْ لِلْمُخَلَّفِينَ مِنَ الْأَعْرَابِ سَتُدْعَوْنَ إِلَىٰ قَوْمٍ أُولِي بَأْسٍ شَدِيدٍ تُقَاتِلُونَهُمْ أَوْ يُسْلِمُونَ ۖ فَإِنْ تُطِيعُوا يُؤْتِكُمُ اللَّهُ أَجْرًا حَسَنًا ۖ وَإِنْ تَتَوَلَّوْا كَمَا تَوَلَّيْتُمْ مِنْ قَبْلُ يُعَذِّبْكُمْ عَذَابًا أَلِيمًا ﴿١٦﴾

No blame attaches to the blind, nor does blame attach to the lame, nor does blame attach to the sick. Whoever obeys God and His Messenger shall be admitted by Him into gardens through which running waters flow; but the one who turns away will He severely punish. (17)

لَيْسَ عَلَى الْأَعْمَىٰ حَرَجٌ وَلَا عَلَى الْأَعْرَجِ حَرَجٌ وَلَا عَلَى الْمَرِيضِ حَرَجٌ ۗ وَمَنْ يُطِعِ اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ يُدْخِلْهُ جَنَّاتٍ تَجْرِي مِنْ تَحْتِهَا الْأَنْهَارُ ۖ وَمَنْ يَتَوَلَّ يُعَذِّبْهُ عَذَابًا أَلِيمًا ﴿١٧﴾

A Different Concept of Victory

We have granted you a glorious victory, so that God may forgive you all your faults, past and future, bestow upon you the full measure of His blessings and guide you on a straight way. God will certainly grant you His mighty support. (Verses 1–3)

The *sūrah* opens with a statement about the great favours bestowed by God on His Messenger, comprising glorious victory, complete forgiveness, perfect blessing and assured guidance. Together, these favours are granted as a reward for complete, unshakeable trust in God's inspiration and directive, as well as a willing submission to His guidance. The Prophet demonstrated absolute trust, leaving no room whatsoever for his own judgement. He had a dream and proceeded to take action on its basis. His she-camel refused to move and people cried out that she had refused to go forward. He told them that such a refusal was not in her nature. "She is held back for the same reason as the elephant was held back. I shall respond favourably to any proposal the Quraysh puts to me today that helps establish good relations and guarantees respect to God's sanctuaries." 'Umar asked him: "Why should we accept humiliation in matters of our faith?" His answer was simple, emphasizing his unwavering trust in God's wisdom: "I am God's servant and Messenger. I shall not disobey Him and He will never abandon me." By contrast, when it is rumoured that 'Uthmān was killed, he showed complete resolve and determination: "We shall not depart until we have fought these people." He called on people to pledge their loyalty. In turn, they gave him their pledges that brought lasting benefits to all who did so.

Such was the victory. Beside it too there was another victory embodied in the peace agreement at al-Ḥudaybiyah, to be followed by numerous other victories taking different forms.

It was a victory in advocating God's message. Al-Zuhrī[5] says: "This victory was the greatest achieved so far in the history of Islam. Battles were fought when armies met in the battlefield. With this peace

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5. A prominent scholar of the second generation after the Prophet's Companions. He was the first to work on a *Ḥadīth* anthology, instructed to do so by Caliph 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz. He died in 124 AH, 743 CE. – Editor's note.

agreement, war was at an end and people were able to talk to each other in safety. They met and discussed all issues. People with any degree of understanding who were approached about Islam soon declared themselves Muslims. In those two years, i.e. between the signing of the al-Ḥudaybiyah Treaty and the fall of Makkah, the number of Muslims doubled or became even greater."

Ibn Hishām says: "The evidence in support of the above statement by al-Zuhrī is found in the fact that the Prophet's Companions at al-Ḥudaybiyah were 1,400, but when he marched to Makkah two years later,[6] he was at the head of an army of 10,000." Among those who became Muslim were Khālid ibn al-Walīd and 'Amr ibn al-'Āṣ.

It was also a great victory on the ground. The Muslim community no longer faced danger from the Quraysh. Therefore, the Prophet was now free to address the problem represented by the Jews in Arabia. After the removal of the Jewish tribes of Qaynuqā', al-Naḍīr and Qurayẓah from Madīnah, following their repeated violations of their friendship agreement with the Muslim community, the Jewish threat came from Khaybar and its fortresses. From there, the Jews could easily make the road to Syria unsafe. Khaybar and all its fortresses fell to the Muslims a short while later, and the Muslims were able to take great war gains which the Prophet divided exclusively among those who accompanied him at al-Ḥudaybiyah.[7]

Al-Ḥudaybiyah Treaty was a decisive victory in the confrontation between the Muslims in Madīnah and the Quraysh in Makkah, supported by all the unbelievers in Arabia. In his biography of the Prophet, Muḥammad 'Izzat Darwazah rightly says:

> Undoubtedly, this peace agreement described in the Qur'ān as a 'glorious victory' amply deserves this description. Indeed it is one of the most decisive and greatest events during the Prophet's lifetime and in Islamic history generally, consolidating the Muslim

6. The Prophet marched to Makkah when the Quraysh flagrantly breached the peace treaty. Makkah fell to Islam with very little fighting. – Editor's note.

7. The only exception was that the Prophet included with them those who came back from Abyssinia and joined him at Khaybar when the battle was over. He considered these to have been on an expedition advocating the Islamic message throughout their 15 years stay in Abyssinia. – Editor's note.

state. For the first time the Quraysh recognized the Prophet and the Muslim state, treating them on an equal footing. It was keen to avoid military confrontation, preferring to peacefully turn them away from their purpose of entering Makkah. Twice before, the Quraysh tried to invade Madīnah, and the second of these attempts took place only one year earlier. At the time, the Quraysh and other confederate tribes raised a great force avowing to exterminate Islam and the Muslims. When the Quraysh launched this attack, the Muslims in Madīnah went through an extremely hard time as, numerically, they were no match for the attacking forces. The new development leading to the signing of the peace treaty had a marked effect on the Arabs; up until then they had looked upon the Quraysh as the master in Arabia and were strongly influenced by its opposition to Islam. Indeed, when the Prophet embarked on his trip to Makkah, the desert Arabs believed that he would not return safely. The hypocrites in Madīnah were of similar views. Taking all this into consideration, we realize the great importance of this victory.

Subsequent events confirmed the wisdom of the Prophet's action, which was endorsed by the Qur'ān. These events highlighted the great material, moral, political, military and religious benefits that accrued to the Muslim community as a result of this peace agreement. They were now looked upon as the most important power in Arabia; the desert Arabs who stayed away from Islam came forward apologizing for their earlier stance, while the hypocrites could hardly raise a voice. Arab delegations came to Madīnah from distant parts pledging loyalty to the Prophet. Subsequently too, the Prophet was able to smash the strength of the Jews in Khaybar and their other villages on the road to Syria. He was able to send delegations to distant parts, such as Najd, Yemen and al-Balqā'. Only two years later, he was able to conquer Makkah peacefully, putting an end to the long drawn out conflict with the Quraysh. It was then that Islam achieved its final victory in Arabia, and people flocked to Islam in large numbers.[8]

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8. Darwazah, Muḥammad 'Izzat, *Sīrat al-Rasūl: Ṣuwar Muqtabasah min al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*, Vol. 2, pp. 292–293.

Furthermore, the signing of the peace treaty at al-Ḥudaybiyah was a great victory in a different sense: it was a conquest of hearts and minds, epitomized by the pledge given by the Prophet's Companions that earned them God's pleasure as specifically mentioned in the *sūrah*. It is this conquest that made them worthy of the image drawn of them in the last verse of the *sūrah*. In the history of the divine message, this was a great victory that must be given its true value as we look at how it influenced the turn of events in subsequent years.

The Prophet was delighted with the revelation of this *sūrah*. He was overjoyed with the great favours God bestowed on him and his Companions: the victory, complete forgiveness, perfect blessings, guidance on a straight way and God's acceptance of the believers and His beautiful description of them in the *sūrah*. He said: "A *sūrah* has been revealed to me tonight, and it is much dearer to me than all that the sun overlooks put together." In another version, he is reported to have said: "A *sūrah* was revealed to me last night which is dearer to me than the whole world and all that it contains." He was keen to express his gratitude to God, and his thanksgiving took the form of long, voluntary prayers, described by his wife, 'Ā'ishah, as follows: "When the Prophet prayed, he would stand up until his feet swelled." She said to him: "Messenger of God! Will you continue to do this when God has forgiven you all your sins, past and future?" He replied: "Should I not, then, be a grateful servant of God?" [Related by Muslim.]

A Medley of Emotions

The first three verses of the *sūrah* were specifically addressed to the Prophet. The *sūrah* goes on to describe the great favours God bestowed on the Muslim community as He gave them such a victory, adding tranquillity to their hearts, and promising further favours in the life to come:

> *It is He who sent down tranquillity into the hearts of the believers, so that they may grow more firm in their faith. To God belongs all the forces of the heavens and the earth; He is indeed All-Knowing, Wise. He will admit the believers, both men and women, into gardens through which*

running waters flow, there to abide, and He will forgive them their bad deeds. That is, in God's sight, a great triumph. (Verses 4–5)

Tranquillity, or *sakīnah* in Arabic, is a word with pleasant connotations. When a heart is blessed with it, it generates reassurance, trust, comfort, dignity and a ready acceptance of God's will.

The believers experienced conflicting emotions during this encounter. They were looking forward to the fulfilment of the Prophet's dream of entering the Sacred Mosque in Makkah, realizing that a prophet's dream always came true. They had then to endure a stand-off with the Quraysh, followed by the Prophet's acceptance to return without visiting the Sacred Mosque that year, even though they had entered into the state of consecration required for that Mosque's entry and had marked their animals for sacrifice following the completion of their worship at the Sacred Mosque. All of this was, therefore, very hard for them to swallow. In addition to what we have already quoted in recording the developments at al-Ḥudaybiyah, 'Umar is also reported to have gone to Abū Bakr and said in reference to the Prophet: "Did he not tell us that we would be visiting the Sacred Mosque and perform *ṭawāf* around it?" Abū Bakr, whose heart echoed the Prophet's own heartbeats, replied: "Did he say that you would do so this year?" 'Umar answered in the negative. Abū Bakr said: "Then you will visit it and do your *ṭawāf* there." 'Umar left Abū Bakr and went straight to the Prophet asking: "Did you not tell us that we would be visiting the Sacred Mosque and perform *ṭawāf* around it?" The Prophet said: "I certainly did; but did I say that you would be doing that this year?" 'Umar again answered in the negative. The Prophet then said: "You will most certainly visit it and do your *ṭawāf* there." This gives us a picture of the feelings the Muslims experienced during the stand-off with the Quraysh.

The believers found other conditions imposed by the Quraysh to be totally unfair. Specifically, they found unacceptable the condition that the Prophet should return to the Quraysh anyone from among them who came to him, declaring himself a Muslim, without being given the prior permission of his father or guardian. They were also totally displeased when the Quraysh delegation objected to the mention of God's name, *al-Raḥmān*, or the Lord of Grace, and with their objection to the Prophet's position as God's Messenger being included in the document.

It is reported that 'Alī, who was writing the document, refused to erase this reference, as requested by the Quraysh representative, Suhayl ibn 'Amr. In fact, the Prophet himself rubbed it out, saying: "My Lord! You know that I am Your Messenger."

The Muslims' dedication and enthusiasm to fight the unbelievers were total, as evidenced by the fact that they all pledged themselves to it. Yet the confrontation ended peacefully, requiring them to turn back and go home. Understandably, this was not easy for them to accept. We sense this in their reluctance to slaughter their sacrifices and shave their heads, indicating the end of their rituals. Indeed, the Prophet had to issue his command to them three times, and this to those who were always quick to put his every order into effect. Furthermore, 'Urwah, the fourth emissary of the Quraysh, reported on this to the Quraysh when he returned to give them his advice. As we have noted already, so great was the feeling among the Muslims that they did not slaughter their sacrifices, nor shave their heads until they saw the Prophet doing so himself. Only his action spurred them to follow suit; such was the state of their bewilderment.

The Muslims had travelled from Madīnah intending to perform *'Umrah*. The thought of fighting was not in their minds. Neither mentally nor practically were they prepared for war. They were surprised to see the Quraysh taking such an adamant stance against them, and they were greatly upset when they heard the news that 'Uthmān had been killed. To the Muslims, it was totally unexpected for the Quraysh to send some of its men to aim arrows and stone missiles at their camp. Therefore, when the Prophet, upon hearing of 'Uthmān's assassination, decided to fight the Quraysh and asked his Companions to give him their pledges in support, every single one of them did so. This did not, however, diminish their surprise to find themselves in a situation totally different from what they hoped to do. Such feelings were only a part of what they experienced. Moreover, they were heavily outnumbered, amounting to 1,400 pilgrims, while the Quraysh were in their own city, supported by desert Arabs and other idolaters.

When we consider all these aspects, we better understand the meaning and the effect of the Qur'ānic statement: "*It is He who sent down tranquillity into the hearts of the believers.*" (Verse 4) We can imagine

the situation as though we are present there, and feel the comfort of this tranquillity and the peace it generated in the believers' hearts. God was fully aware that the feelings they experienced were motivated by faith. They were keen to defend their faith and fight for it. They did not look for any personal glory. Therefore, He bestowed His blessings on them, giving them such tranquillity, "*so that they may grow more firm in their faith.*" (Verse 4) Reassurance is of a higher rank than passion and enthusiasm. It carries with it a combination of trust, conviction and absence of worry.

The *sūrah* also indicates that military victory was in no way difficult. On the contrary, it was easy, had God, in His infinite wisdom, decided to gratify the believers' wishes. At His command there are countless forces that cannot be overcome. They would have ensured victory for the Muslims at His bidding, whenever He wished: "*To God belongs all the forces of the heavens and the earth; He is indeed All-Knowing, Wise.*" (Verse 4) Indeed everything moves as determined by God in His wisdom. It was through His knowledge and wisdom that He "*sent down tranquillity into the hearts of the believers, so that they may grow more firm in their faith.*" (Verse 4) He will thus bring about what He has decided to give them: victory and blessings: "*He will admit the believers, both men and women, into gardens through which running waters flow, there to abide, and He will forgive them their bad deeds. That is, in God's sight, a great triumph.*" (Verse 5)

If in God's sight this is a great triumph, then it is indeed a great one. It was so for those who achieved it, giving it its right measure. The believers were delighted with what God granted them. Having listened to the opening of the *sūrah*, learning about the favours God bestowed on His Messenger, they were looking forward to their own share, asking about it. When they were told of it, they were delighted and reassured.

The *sūrah* then tells them of another aspect of God's wisdom in letting events develop in the way they did; namely, requiting the unbelievers and the hypocrites for their actions:

> *God will also inflict suffering on the hypocrites and the polytheists, men and women, who harbour evil thoughts about God. Evil encompasses them from all sides, and they incur God's anger. He has rejected them and has prepared for them hell, an evil destination. To God belongs all*

the forces of the heavens and the earth; He is indeed Almighty, Wise. (Verses 6–7)

These verses group together the hypocrites and the idolaters, men and women, highlighting their common characteristic of harbouring evil thoughts about God, having no trust in His forthcoming help to the believers. The *sūrah* makes clear that they are all encompassed by evil and cannot depart from its circle. They incur God's anger and, therefore, they are expelled from His mercy. Evil will be their end. In fact, hypocrisy is in no way less than idolatry; indeed it is more contemptible. The harm the hypocrites do to the Muslim community is no less than what the idolaters do, although the two types are different in nature and physical aspects.

The *sūrah* makes harbouring evil thoughts about God the distinctive feature of the hypocrites and the unbelievers. A believer always thinks well of God, expecting what is good in all situations, good and bad. He believes that God will bring him good in both conditions. The fact is that a believer's heart always looks up to God, whose grace and favours never cease. When we establish the bond of faith with God, we realize this fact and appreciate it. The hypocrites and the unbelievers, by contrast, have no bond with God. They have no feeling of this concept, which, in turn, leads them to entertain evil thoughts about Him, casting only a superficial look at things and judging situations by appearances. Thus, they expect only evil to befall them and to befall the believers whenever appearances so suggest. They have no idea of God's power, control of things and events, or His subtle and elaborate planning.

The verse groups together all types of enemies of Islam, describing their position with God and what He has prepared for them, adding a comment pointing to God's power and wisdom: "*To God belongs all the forces of the heavens and the earth; He is indeed Almighty, Wise.*" (Verse 7) Nothing of their situation escapes God, and nothing is too hard for Him.

The Promise and the Reward

Again the *sūrah* addresses the Prophet, pointing out his role and its objective. It tells the believers about their duty towards God after having

received His message. It makes clear to them that the pledges they gave to the Prophet were indeed pledges given to God. Solemn indeed is a pledge made to God. Furthermore, this imparts to the pledge given to the Prophet even greater honour:

> *We have sent you [Muḥammad] as a witness, a bearer of good news and a warner so that you [people] may believe in God and His Messenger, support Him, honour Him and extol His limitless glory morning and evening. Those who pledge their allegiance to you are actually pledging their allegiance to God: God's hand is over their hands. He who breaks his pledge does so to his own detriment; but to the one who fulfils his pledge to Him, God will grant a rich reward.* (Verses 8–10)

God's Messenger, (peace be upon him), is a witness who will testify that he has delivered the message entrusted to him to mankind, and he will speak of the reception people gave him. He will state that some people believed and accepted the faith while others rejected it denying its truth, and others still were hypocrites. Some did well and others did badly. He will give his testimony just as he delivered his message. He bears the good news of forgiveness and acceptance by God, as well as a good reward from Him to the believers. He also warns against the ill fate that awaits the unbelievers, hypocrites and evildoers, as they all incur God's anger.

Such is the Prophet's role. Addressing the believers, the *sūrah* makes clear to them the purpose of God's message: it is to believe in God and His Messenger, and to fulfil the tasks and duties of faith. Thus, they support God by implementing His law, and they honour Him in their hearts as they feel His majesty. They also extol His glory and praise Him at both ends of the day, which means in effect the whole day. What is meant here is that in their hearts and minds they feel their bond with God at all times. This is the result of faith which the believers will receive because God sent His Messenger and assigned to him his role outlined in the verse: "*a witness, a bearer of good news and a warner*". (Verse 8)

The Prophet came to them to establish their bond with God, and to solemnize a pledge they give to Him that continues even though the Prophet is no longer with them. When he stretches his hand out to accept their pledges, he is doing so on God's behalf: "*Those who pledge*

their allegiance to you are actually pledging their allegiance to God: God's hand is over their hands." (Verse 10) This is an awesome description. When any of them put his hand in the Prophet's to give his pledge, he realized that God was there present, accepting the pledge, and that His hand also embraced their hands. How awesome and majestic.

This image puts an end to any thought anyone might have had about retracting their pledge. Should the Prophet disappear in person, God Himself will never disappear. It is He who accepts this pledge, watches its fulfilment and gives its reward. "*He who breaks his pledge does so to his own detriment.*" (Verse 10) Whatever pledge is made between God and any of His servants is richly profitable to God's servant. It is he who will profit by God's favours, while God is in no need of anyone. Therefore, when anyone breaks his pledge with God, he is the loser. Furthermore, he exposes himself to God's anger and punishment, because God loves those who are true to their promises and dislikes those who deliberately break them. "*But to the one who fulfils his pledge to Him, God will grant a rich reward.*" (Verse 10) No details are given here of the reward; it is merely described as rich, or great, as is the literal meaning of the Arabic adjective *'aẓīm* used here. This reward is rich by God's measure and value which we who dwell in this limited space of the earth can never imagine.

The Ones Left Behind

Having established the true nature of the pledge and referred to thoughts of breaking or honouring it, the *sūrah* now speaks of the desert Arabs who were left behind. They refused to accompany the Prophet on this expedition, entertaining no good thoughts about God, expecting defeat for the believers who were going to the Quraysh's own land, when it was the Quraysh that had attacked Madīnah twice over a short period of time.[9] The *sūrah* tells the Prophet of what excuses the desert Arabs would employ when they see him returning safely together with his Companions. They would realize that the treaty he

9. The original text says that the two attacks occurred in two successive years, i.e. within one year or a little more of each other. The fact is that the first, the Battle of Uḥud, took place in Shawwal, the 10th month of year 3, while the second, the Encounter of the Moat, occurred towards the end of year 5, which means that two full years separated them. – Editor's note.

had concluded with the Quraysh signified that the latter had climbed down. No matter how harsh its conditions may appear, the Quraysh now treated Muḥammad (peace be upon him) and his followers as its equal, with whom it sought peace rather than confrontation. The *sūrah* also details the true reasons why these desert Arabs stayed behind, exposing their reality to the Prophet and the believers. It tells the Prophet of the rich war gains the Muslims would shortly achieve, and that these same Arabs would try to accompany them on their next encounter in order to receive a share of those. The *sūrah* tells the Prophet what he should say to them when this takes place. He must not allow them to be part of that expedition, which was certain to end in his favour. Only those present at al-Ḥudaybiyah would be permitted to accompany him. He was also to tell those Arabs left behind that they would be called upon to join the Muslims when they needed to fight other people known for their great war prowess. If they truly wanted to join the Muslim camp, they should join the Muslim army on that day, whatever outcome God may give them. If they obeyed, they would receive rich reward. If they turned away, as they did once before, they would be made to endure a painful suffering:

> *The desert Arabs who stayed behind will say to you, 'Our property and our families kept us busy; do then ask God to forgive us.' Thus they say with their tongues what is not in their hearts. Say: 'Who, then, can avert from you anything that God might have willed, whether it be His will to harm you or to confer a benefit on you? No! God is fully aware of what you do.' No! You thought that the Messenger and the believers would never return to their families and this thought seemed pleasing to your hearts. You entertained such evil thoughts because you have always been devoid of goodness. As for those who will not believe in God and His Messenger, We have prepared a blazing fire for the unbelievers. To God belongs the dominion over the heavens and the earth. He forgives whoever He will and punishes whoever He will. God is much-forgiving, ever merciful. When you set forth on a course that promises war gains, those who previously stayed behind will say: "Let us come with you." They thus seek to alter God's words. Say: "You shall not come with us. God has already said so." They will then say: "You begrudge us [our share]." How little they understand. Say to*

the desert Arabs who stayed behind: "You will be called upon to fight against a people of great prowess in war: you will have to fight them unless they surrender. If you obey, God will reward you well; but if you turn away as you have done before, He will inflict on you painful suffering." (Verses 11–16)

The Qur'ān does not merely reply to the excuses of those who stayed behind; it uses the occasion to treat minds and souls, identifying the points of weakness and deviation in order to treat them effectively. It then states those values that are true and permanent, as well as the proper basis on which to base attitudes and behaviour.

Those Arabs who stayed behind belonged to the tribes of Ghifār, Muzaynah, Ashja', Aslam and others who lived in the area close to Madīnah. They tried to excuse themselves, saying: "*Our property and our families kept us busy.*" (Verse 11) This is no excuse. People will always have families and property. If having these is a good excuse to exempt anyone from their duties towards their faith, no one would ever fulfil such duties. They also asked the Prophet: "*do then ask God to forgive us.*" (Verse 11) Even when they say this, they are not serious: "*Thus they say with their tongues what is not in their hearts.*" (Verse 11) The reply given them stresses the truth of God's will that cannot be stopped or prevented by bravery in war or its avoidance. They are all subject to God's power, and He is fully aware of all things. His will controls everything as He determines: "*Say: Who, then, can avert from you anything that God might have willed, whether it be His will to harm you or to confer a benefit on you? No! God is fully aware of what you do.*" (Verse 11)

The question implies the instruction to submit to God's will and to obey His orders without hesitation. No hesitation will ever prevent harm or delay benefit. Excuses are no use, because nothing escapes God's knowledge and nothing affects the requital He decides on the basis of His perfect knowledge. This is a fitting directive, using the appropriate moment in order to heighten its effect.

"*No! You thought that the Messenger and the believers would never return to their families and this thought seemed pleasing to your hearts. You entertained such evil thoughts because you have always been devoid of goodness.*" (Verse 12) Thus they are shown the truth of their attitude. Their true thoughts and intentions, which they thought were concealed,

are placed before their very eyes. They thought that the Prophet and his Companions were going to their death, and that they would never return to their families in Madīnah. They said of the Prophet: 'Is he going to fight those who attacked him in his home city and killed his Companions?' They allowed no room for the care God takes of those of His servants who are dedicated to His cause. Moreover, since they lacked motivation based on faith, they could not feel the importance of duty and that a duty must be fulfilled, regardless of the cost. Nor did they realize that obedience to the Prophet must not be based on any thought of gain or loss. It must be fulfilled as a duty, regardless of the outcome.

The thoughts they had seemed pleasing to their hearts. They could not see any other possibility. Their ill thoughts about God derived from the fact that their hearts had always been devoid of goodness. The *sūrah* uses a single Arabic word, *būr*, for the phrase 'devoid of goodness'. This word is normally used to describe a dead land where no plant can grow. The same applies to these Arab's hearts, as also to them generally. Their hearts are lifeless, yield nothing good. How else would a human heart be when it harbours no good thought of God, having severed its bond with Him? It must be *būr*, lifeless, heading for nothing good.

The True Balance

Such do people think of the Muslim community. However, it is only people like those desert Arabs who have severed their bond with God, their hearts devoid of goodness, who view the Muslim community as being on the verge of eradication, heavily outnumbered by the forces of evil and deviation. They look at the limited numbers of the advocates of Islam, or their poor artillery, or their low position in society and conclude that they will inevitably be defeated. Like the desert Arabs of old, such people avoid every association with the believers, looking only for their own safety. God, however, will ensure that such ill thoughts inevitably end in failure, and will change positions as only He knows how, to set the true balance. It is He who holds this balance in His mighty hand, lowering some people and raising others above them. The hypocrites who harbour evil thoughts about God, throughout all places and generations, can never understand how this is done.

The true balance is that of faith. Therefore, those Arabs are referred to it. The *sūrah* outlines the general rule of rewarding people in accordance with this balance, highlighting the possibility of receiving God's grace. They are thus encouraged to take the opportunity available to them now in order to benefit by God's forgiveness and to enjoy His grace: "*As for those who will not believe in God and His Messenger, We have prepared a blazing fire for the unbelievers. To God belongs the dominion over the heavens and the earth. He forgives whoever He will and punishes whoever He will. God is much-forgiving, ever merciful.*" (Verses 13–14)

They used to cite their families and property as the reasons why they stayed behind. Of what benefit will their families and property be to them when they are thrown in the blazing fire, which has been prepared for them if they continue to deny God and His Messenger? These verses show such people the two options available to them and they are invited to choose one. Then it is God who issues the promise and the warning to them. To Him belongs the heavens and the earth and all in between them. It is He who can extend forgiveness and inflict punishment, as He chooses.

God rewards people according to their deeds, but His will is free, unrestricted by anything. This truth is established here so that it is accepted by all. There is no conflict between it and the fact that people's reward is based on their actions, because this is the basis that God has willed to choose.

Nevertheless, God's forgiveness and mercy is close at hand. Let anyone who so wishes benefit by it, before the suffering befalls those who refuse to believe in God and His Messenger in accordance with His will.

Fine Prospects

The *sūrah* then shows a glimpse of the prospects God has in store for the believers, contrary to all the unbelievers' thoughts. This is done in such a way that suggests that it is all going to happen soon: "*When you set forth on a course that promises war gains, those who previously stayed behind will say: 'Let us come with you.' They thus seek to alter God's words. Say: 'You shall not come with us. God has already said so.' They will then say: 'You begrudge us [our share].' How little they understand.*" (Verse 15)

Most commentators on the Qur'ān take this verse to refer to the conquest of Khaybar. This may be so, but the statement also gives clear impressions that do not necessarily relate to Khaybar. It suggests that the Muslims would soon achieve an easy victory. Those who previously stayed behind would realize that it would be so and hence they ask to join the Muslims. Perhaps what makes Qur'ānic commentators specify Khaybar is that this occurred soon after al-Ḥudaybiyah. Indeed, it took place in the first month of year 7, less than two months after the signing of the treaty, and it brought the Muslims rich war gains. Khaybar was the last Jewish stronghold in the Arabian Peninsula. It was here that some of the Jews of al-Naḍīr and Qurayẓah had sought refuge after they were ordered out of Madīnah.

Commentators are almost unanimous that God promised those who give the Prophet their pledges at al-Ḥudaybiyah would have the war gains achieved at Khaybar, all for themselves, with no share for anyone else. I have not found any text to support this view, which may though be based on what actually happened. When the Prophet marched on Khaybar, he did not allow anyone to join him other than those who had taken part at al-Ḥudaybiyah.

Be that as it may, God instructed the Prophet to refuse permission to those who had previously stayed behind, assuming that they even offered to join the Muslim army. Specifically, he was to say that their participation would be contrary to God's orders. He also told the Prophet that when they were refused such permission, they would say: "*You begrudge us*", and want to deprive us of our legitimate share of any war gains. What they say thus betrays their lack of understanding of God's purpose. It is fitting that those who are eager to share in the booty be deprived of it, while those who are dedicated to God's cause, obeying His orders, should enjoy His grace and be the ones to enjoy the war gains He grants the Muslim community. They were the ones who had obeyed when they expected nothing other than a hard fight.

God further instructed the Prophet to tell them that they would be called upon to fight against people known for their war prowess, and that the fight would continue until this enemy had been subdued. Should those who formerly stayed behind pass this test, they will still receive their reward, but if they continue to disobey they will have failed what is their final test: "*Say to the desert Arabs who stayed behind: 'You will*

be called upon to fight against a people of great prowess in war: you will have to fight them unless they surrender. If you obey, God will reward you well; but if you turn away as you have done before, He will inflict on you painful suffering.'" (Verse 16)

Reports differ as to the identity of this military might, and to whether this would occur during the Prophet's lifetime or after he passed away. It is most likely, however that it happened during his lifetime so as to further test the Arabs in the surrounding areas of Madīnah. What is important here is to note the Qur'ānic method of education, and how hearts and souls are treated by Qur'ānic directives and practical tests. We see this clearly in the way the inner thoughts of those who stayed behind were exposed before their very own eyes to the believers. We also see it in the way true values and the principles of proper behaviour are pointed out to them.

Since the test makes it a duty binding on everyone to join the Muslim army, God identifies those with real excuses who are exempt from so joining, without their being subject to any punishment: "*No blame attaches to the blind, nor does blame attach to the lame, nor does blame attach to the sick. Whoever obeys God and His Messenger shall be admitted by Him into gardens through which running waters flow; but the one who turns away will He severely punish.*" (Verse 17) A person who is blind or lame has a permanent disability exempting him from military engagement. A person who is sick has a temporary excuse, one that extends until he has recovered full health.

Ultimately, it is all a question of obedience or disobedience. It is a mental attitude, not a technical situation. Those who obey God and His Messenger will be rewarded by admittance into heaven. Those who turn away will receive painful suffering. Anyone can put the hardship of striving for God's cause in the balance against the comfort of staying behind and what it entails. He may then make his own choice.

2

People's Pledges and God's Promises

God was indeed well pleased with the believers when they pledged their allegiance to you under the tree. He knew what was in their hearts and so He sent down tranquillity upon them, and rewarded them with a speedy victory, (18)

لَّقَدْ رَضِيَ ٱللَّهُ عَنِ ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ
إِذْ يُبَايِعُونَكَ تَحْتَ ٱلشَّجَرَةِ فَعَلِمَ
مَا فِي قُلُوبِهِمْ فَأَنزَلَ ٱلسَّكِينَةَ عَلَيْهِمْ
وَأَثَٰبَهُمْ فَتْحًا قَرِيبًا ﴿١٨﴾

and with many war gains for them to take. God is Almighty, Wise. (19)

وَمَغَانِمَ كَثِيرَةً يَأْخُذُونَهَا وَكَانَ ٱللَّهُ
عَزِيزًا حَكِيمًا ﴿١٩﴾

God has promised you [people] many war gains that you shall achieve. He has hastened this gain for you and He has held back the hands of hostile people from you, so that this may become a sign for the believers. He will guide you on a straight way. (20)

وَعَدَكُمُ ٱللَّهُ مَغَانِمَ كَثِيرَةً
تَأْخُذُونَهَا فَعَجَّلَ لَكُمْ هَٰذِهِۦ وَكَفَّ
أَيْدِيَ ٱلنَّاسِ عَنكُمْ وَلِتَكُونَ ءَايَةً
لِّلْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَيَهْدِيَكُمْ صِرَٰطًا
مُّسْتَقِيمًا ﴿٢٠﴾

There are still other gains to come, which are still beyond your power. God has full control over them. God has power over all things. (21)

وَأُخْرَىٰ لَمْ تَقْدِرُوا عَلَيْهَا قَدْ أَحَاطَ اللَّهُ بِهَا ۚ وَكَانَ اللَّهُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرًا ﴿٢١﴾

Were the unbelievers to fight you, they would have turned their back in flight. They shall find none to protect or support them. (22)

وَلَوْ قَاتَلَكُمُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا لَوَلَّوُا الْأَدْبَارَ ثُمَّ لَا يَجِدُونَ وَلِيًّا وَلَا نَصِيرًا ﴿٢٢﴾

Such was God's way which operated in the past; and never will you find any change in God's way. (23)

سُنَّةَ اللَّهِ الَّتِي قَدْ خَلَتْ مِنْ قَبْلُ ۖ وَلَنْ تَجِدَ لِسُنَّةِ اللَّهِ تَبْدِيلًا ﴿٢٣﴾

It is He who, in the valley of Makkah, stayed their hands from you, and your hands from them, after He gave you the advantage over them. God sees all that you do. (24)

وَهُوَ الَّذِي كَفَّ أَيْدِيَهُمْ عَنْكُمْ وَأَيْدِيَكُمْ عَنْهُمْ بِبَطْنِ مَكَّةَ مِنْ بَعْدِ أَنْ أَظْفَرَكُمْ عَلَيْهِمْ ۚ وَكَانَ اللَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ بَصِيرًا ﴿٢٤﴾

They were the ones who disbelieved, and who debarred you from the Sacred Mosque and prevented your offering from reaching its place of sacrifice. Had it not been for the fact that there were among them believing men and women unknown to you and whom you might have unwittingly trampled underfoot, and on whose account you would have unwittingly incurred guilt.

هُمُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا وَصَدُّوكُمْ عَنِ الْمَسْجِدِ الْحَرَامِ وَالْهَدْيَ مَعْكُوفًا أَنْ يَبْلُغَ مَحِلَّهُ ۚ وَلَوْلَا رِجَالٌ مُؤْمِنُونَ وَنِسَاءٌ مُؤْمِنَاتٌ لَمْ تَعْلَمُوهُمْ أَنْ تَطَئُوهُمْ فَتُصِيبَكُمْ مِنْهُمْ مَعَرَّةٌ بِغَيْرِ

God will admit to His grace whomever He wills. Had they stood apart, We would have inflicted on the unbelievers among them truly painful suffering. (25)

عِلْمٍ لِّيُدْخِلَ ٱللَّهُ فِى رَحْمَتِهِۦ مَن
يَشَآءُ لَوْ تَزَيَّلُوا۟ لَعَذَّبْنَا ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟
مِنْهُمْ عَذَابًا أَلِيمًا ﴿٢٥﴾

The unbelievers fanned fury in their hearts, the fury of ignorance. Meanwhile, God sent down tranquillity on His Messenger and on the believers, and made the word of piety binding on them. They were most worthy of it and deserved it well. God has full knowledge of all things. (26)

إِذْ جَعَلَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ فِى قُلُوبِهِمُ
ٱلْحَمِيَّةَ حَمِيَّةَ ٱلْجَٰهِلِيَّةِ فَأَنزَلَ ٱللَّهُ
سَكِينَتَهُۥ عَلَىٰ رَسُولِهِۦ وَعَلَى ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ
وَأَلْزَمَهُمْ كَلِمَةَ ٱلتَّقْوَىٰ وَكَانُوٓا۟
أَحَقَّ بِهَا وَأَهْلَهَا ۚ وَكَانَ ٱللَّهُ بِكُلِّ
شَىْءٍ عَلِيمًا ﴿٢٦﴾

God has shown the truth in His Messenger's true vision: most certainly you shall enter the Sacred Mosque, if God so wills, in full security, with your heads shaved or your hair cut short, without fear. God knew what you did not, and He granted you, besides this, a speedy victory. (27)

لَّقَدْ صَدَقَ ٱللَّهُ رَسُولَهُ ٱلرُّءْيَا بِٱلْحَقِّ ۖ
لَتَدْخُلُنَّ ٱلْمَسْجِدَ ٱلْحَرَامَ إِن شَآءَ ٱللَّهُ
ءَامِنِينَ مُحَلِّقِينَ رُءُوسَكُمْ وَمُقَصِّرِينَ
لَا تَخَافُونَ ۖ فَعَلِمَ مَا لَمْ تَعْلَمُوا۟ فَجَعَلَ
مِن دُونِ ذَٰلِكَ فَتْحًا قَرِيبًا ﴿٢٧﴾

It is He who sent His Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth so as to make it prevail over all religions. Sufficient is God as a witness. (28)

هُوَ ٱلَّذِىٓ أَرْسَلَ رَسُولَهُۥ بِٱلْهُدَىٰ
وَدِينِ ٱلْحَقِّ لِيُظْهِرَهُۥ عَلَى ٱلدِّينِ كُلِّهِۦ ۚ
وَكَفَىٰ بِٱللَّهِ شَهِيدًا ﴿٢٨﴾

Muḥammad is God's Messenger; and those who are with him are firm and unyielding towards the unbelievers, full of mercy towards one another. You can see them bowing down, prostrating in prayer, seeking favour with God and His good pleasure. They bear on their faces the marks of their prostrations. This is how they are pictured in the Torah. And in the Gospels, they are like a seed that brings forth its shoot, strengthens it, grows thick and stands firm on its stem, delighting the sowers. Through them God will enrage the unbelievers. To those of them who believe and do righteous deeds God has promised forgiveness and a rich reward. (29)

مُّحَمَّدٌ رَّسُولُ ٱللَّهِ وَٱلَّذِينَ مَعَهُۥٓ أَشِدَّآءُ
عَلَى ٱلْكُفَّارِ رُحَمَآءُ بَيْنَهُمْ تَرَىٰهُمْ رُكَّعًا
سُجَّدًا يَبْتَغُونَ فَضْلًا مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ وَرِضْوَٰنًا
سِيمَاهُمْ فِى وُجُوهِهِم مِّنْ أَثَرِ ٱلسُّجُودِ
ذَٰلِكَ مَثَلُهُمْ فِى ٱلتَّوْرَىٰةِ وَمَثَلُهُمْ فِى
ٱلْإِنجِيلِ كَزَرْعٍ أَخْرَجَ شَطْـَٔهُۥ فَـَٔازَرَهُۥ
فَٱسْتَغْلَظَ فَٱسْتَوَىٰ عَلَىٰ سُوقِهِۦ
يُعْجِبُ ٱلزُّرَّاعَ لِيَغِيظَ بِهِمُ ٱلْكُفَّارَ
وَعَدَ ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَعَمِلُوا۟
ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ مِنْهُم مَّغْفِرَةً وَأَجْرًا
عَظِيمًۢا ﴿٢٩﴾

Overview

This part of the *sūrah* speaks only about and with the believers, with that unique and happy group of them who gave their pledges and commitments to the Prophet under the tree, in the presence of God, the witness who solemnized that pledge placing His hand over theirs. That elite group heard God's words revealed to His Messenger: "*God was indeed well pleased with the believers when they pledged their allegiance to you under the tree. He knew what was in their hearts and so He sent down tranquillity upon them, and rewarded them with a speedy victory.*" (Verse 18) They also listened to the Prophet as he said to them: "You are today the best people on earth." [Related by al-Bukhārī on the authority of Jābir ibn 'Abdullāh.]

What we have here is a discourse about this select group as God speaks to His Messenger. We also have God's words to this select group, giving them the happy news of forthcoming war gains and conquests. God also speaks about the care He took of them, protecting them from their enemies, during this trip and what He will do for them in future, assuring them of victory by means of the laws He has set in operation, which never fail. He strongly condemns the enemies of the Muslim community, explains the wisdom behind choosing peace this time, confirming the truth of the Prophet's dream about visiting the Sacred Mosque. He assures the Muslims that they will enter it in safety, fearing nothing, and that His faith will prevail over all religions on earth.

The *sūrah* concludes with a verse describing this community of believers, the Prophet's Companions, adding their descriptions to be found in the Torah and the Gospels, as well as His promise of forgiveness of their sins and granting them a great reward.

A Unique Event

> *God was indeed well pleased with the believers when they pledged their allegiance to you under the tree. He knew what was in their hearts and so He sent down tranquillity upon them, and rewarded them with a speedy victory, and with many war gains for them to take. God is Almighty, Wise.* (Verses 18–19)

Today, fourteen hundred years after the event, I am trying to visualize the great moment when the universe witnessed the divine announcement from on high addressed by God Almighty to His trusted Messenger concerning the Muslim community. I want to see the whole universe at that great moment and its conscience as it responds to this most generous announcement, speaking of a group of people at a particular spot in this universe. I want to feel how those extremely happy people felt when they heard, with their own ears, that God was speaking about them, telling them that He was well pleased with them, defining the place where they were and what they had done in order to earn His pleasure: "*when they pledged their allegiance to you under the tree.*" (Verse

18) They heard it all from the Prophet who never said anything but the truth, delivering it as a special message from God Almighty.

O my God! How did they – those happy people – receive that divine communication at that ecstatic moment? It is a communication that points to every single one of them and says, "to you in person God is saying that He was well pleased with you as you pledged your allegiance under the tree. He was aware of your inner feelings and He bestowed tranquillity on you."

When we read or hear God's statement: "*God is the Patron of the believers,*" (2: 257) or, "*God is with those who are patient,*" (2: 153) we may feel happy and reassured, hoping that we may be included among such. Those people, however, heard that God was speaking about them personally and individually, telling each of them that He was well pleased with them, knowing what was in their hearts. That is great indeed!

"*God was indeed well pleased with the believers when they pledged their allegiance to you under the tree. He knew what was in their hearts and so He sent down tranquillity upon them, and rewarded them with a speedy victory.*" (Verse 18) He knew that the passion they felt in their hearts was for their faith, not for their ego or for personal glory. He knew that their pledges were sincere, and that they were seriously restraining themselves so that they would stand behind the Prophet in all sincerity, obeying his orders, accepting any adversity with patience. Therefore, "*He sent down tranquillity upon them.*" We almost see this tranquillity being lowered calmly and with dignity, pouring an air of peace and reassurance on those hearts that were full of enthusiasm for direct action.

God also "*rewarded them with a speedy victory.*" (Verse 18) This peace treaty, coupled with the circumstances leading to it, was indeed a victory, heralding many more. The conquest of Khaybar, which most commentators cite as the one promised here, may indeed have been one of these. "*And with many war gains for them to take.*" (Verse 19) If the victory meant here is that of Khaybar, then the war gains would be with the victory itself. However, if the victory mentioned refers to the peace treaty itself, then the promised war gains would come later. Indeed, the peace treaty left the Muslims free to achieve victory on several fronts.

"*God is Almighty, Wise.*" (Verse 19) This comment fits well with the preceding verses. God's pleasure, the victory and the promise of war

gains are all indicative of God's might, control, elaborate planning and wisdom.

As God Speaks

Now the *sūrah* addresses the believers themselves, speaking to them of the peace treaty, or victory, to which they resigned themselves:

> *God has promised you [people] many war gains that you shall achieve. He has hastened this gain for you and He has held back the hands of hostile people from you, so that this may become a sign for the believers. He will guide you on a straight way. There are still other gains to come, which are still beyond your power. God has full control over them. God has power over all things.* (Verses 20–21)

This is an announcement of happy things to happen, given by God to the believers who accept it as certain. They realize that God has prepared for them numerous gains and they lived afterwards to see this true promise fulfilled in the best way. God says to them here that He has hastened this one, which may be a reference to al-Ḥudaybiyah, as stated by Ibn 'Abbās, to emphasize its being a victory, as indeed it was, or it may be a reference to Khaybar, as Mujāhid says, since Khaybar produced the first war gains after al-Ḥudaybiyah. The first view is perhaps much weightier.

God also granted them a favour when He restrained the hands of hostile forces. He indeed held back the hands of the Quraysh, as well as other hostile groups who were waiting for a chance to attack the Muslims. Their opponents outnumbered them by far, but the believers were true to their pledges, fulfilling their duties. Therefore, God rewarded them by restraining and holding back their enemies' hands.

"*So that this may become a sign for the believers.*" (Verse 20) This encounter, which they disliked at first, feeling it to be too much of a demand, is described by God as a great sign, which will enable them to see the results of what He has planned for them and how they will be rewarded for obeying the Prophet and submitting to His will. Thus, they will come to realize that it is great, bringing them much benefit, and they will be doubly reassured.

"*He will guide you on a straight way.*" (Verse 20) This is again a reward for your obedience and true allegiance. Thus, they will have a combination of war gains and guidance on a straight way, giving them all that is good. All this comes about as a result of something they initially disliked. God, thus, teaches them that what He chooses for them is the best thing. This also trains them to show absolute obedience.

God also tells them of other favours He will grant them. There will be more war gains: these they are unable to secure by virtue of their own forces, but which God will let them have by cause of His power and planning: "*There are still other gains to come, which are still beyond your power. God has full control over them. God has power over all things.*" (Verse 21)

Again, reports differ as to what these gains refer to: is it to the conquest of Makkah? Or to Khaybar? Or is it the victories secured against the Byzantine and Persian Empires? Or does it refer to all other conquests achieved by the Muslim community after al-Ḥudaybiyah? Most probably, the *sūrah* refers here to the conquest of Makkah, which followed the Treaty of al-Ḥudaybiyah and resulted from it. The peace treaty lasted only two years. Thereafter the unbelievers violated it, and God facilitated Makkah's conquest for the Muslims, with hardly any fighting. It was Makkah that had continued to present great difficulties for the Muslim community in Madīnah. It had attacked them twice, and was able to turn them away from the Sacred Mosque when they tried to visit it prior to signing the Treaty of al-Ḥudaybiyah. God, however, overwhelmed Makkah with His power, handing it over to the Muslims without fighting: "*God has power over all things.*" (Verse 21) This was, then, an implicit piece of happy news. It was left undefined because at the time when the *sūrah* was revealed, it still belonged to the future, which is part of the realm that lies beyond human perception. Hence, God gives them this hint to reassure them and help them to look forward to what may be coming their way.

In line with the reference to the present war gains and the future ones they await, the *sūrah* clearly tells the Muslims that they will be victorious. The signing of the peace treaty was in no way due to their weakness, or because the unbelievers were too strong for them. Instead, it was meant to happen for a definite purpose God wanted to achieve. Had

the unbelievers fought them, they would have been crushed. Such is the rule whenever the believers and unbelievers meet in a decisive battle:

> *Were the unbelievers to fight you, they would have turned their back in flight. They shall find none to protect or support them. Such was God's way which operated in the past; and never will you find any change in God's way.* (Verses 22–23)

Thus, victory for the believers and defeat of their enemies are part of the universal law God has set in operation. It is unchangeable. This is bound to give the believers immense confidence and reassurance. They know that God's law will never fail to operate. It may be delayed for some time, for reasons that are closely related to the adherence of the believers to the way God wants them to adhere, or for reasons that bring about the conditions that lead to victory for the believers against the unbelievers. There may be other reasons known to God for such delay, but God's law will continue to operate, without fail: "*Never will you find any change in God's way.*" (Verse 23)

God also reminds them of His favour when he stayed the unbelievers' hands from the Muslims, and stayed the Muslims' hands after they had gained victory over their attackers. This refers to an incident when about 40 of the unbelievers tried to launch an offensive. They were taken prisoner, but the Prophet pardoned them:

> *It is He who, in the valley of Makkah, stayed their hands from you, and your hands from them, after He gave you the advantage over them. God sees all that you do.* (Verse 24)

This was an event the addressees witnessed, but God mentions it in this way to refer every move and every happening to His direct planning. They, thus, feel how God's hand directs everything for them, guides their footsteps and their feelings. They will then unhesitatingly surrender themselves to Him. They will be absolutely certain that everything is in God's hand, and that His choice is the best. They move according to His will in everything they choose or refuse. He wants only what is best for them. When they surrender to Him, every good thing comes their way easily and without delay. He sees them and knows the ins and outs

of their situation. What He chooses for them is based on His perfect knowledge. He will not let anything they deserve escape them: "*God sees all that you do.*" (Verse 24)

Exposing the Unbelievers

The *sūrah* then tells the believers about their opponents' position in God's sight. It explains how God considers the unbelievers' actions as they turn the believers away from His Sacred House, and how He looks at the believers in a totally different way from these others:

> *They were the ones who disbelieved, and who debarred you from the Sacred Mosque and prevented your offering from reaching its place of sacrifice. Had it not been for the fact that there were among them believing men and women unknown to you and whom you might have unwittingly trampled underfoot, and on whose account you would have unwittingly incurred guilt... God will admit to His grace whomever He wills. Had they stood apart, We would have inflicted on the unbelievers among them truly painful suffering. The unbelievers fanned fury in their hearts, the fury of ignorance. Meanwhile, God sent down tranquillity on His Messenger and on the believers, and made the word of piety binding on them. They were most worthy of it and deserved it well. God has full knowledge of all things.* (Verses 25–26)

According to God's measure, they are truly unbelievers, deserving this repugnant description: "*They were the ones who disbelieved.*" (Verse 25) This is recorded against them as if they are the only ones in this class, confirmed in disbelief. Hence, they deserve to be disliked by God who hates unbelief and unbelievers. Their other obnoxious deed of turning the believers away from the Sacred Mosque and forbidding the sacrificial animals from reaching their destination is also recorded: "*They were the ones who disbelieved, and who debarred you from the Sacred Mosque and prevented your offering from reaching its place of sacrifice.*" (Verse 25)

This amounted to gross misconduct according to Islamic and pre-Islamic traditions; it was gross according to all religions known in the Arabian Peninsula since the time of Abraham, their great ancestor.

Restraining the believers from fighting them was not, then, out of compassion or because their fault was small. It was for a different purpose which God explains to the believers: "*Had it not been for the fact that there were among them believing men and women unknown to you and whom you might have unwittingly trampled underfoot, and on whose account you would have unwittingly incurred guilt...*" (Verse 25) There were a number of Muslims in Makkah who could not migrate to Madīnah because of their weak position, and did not declare their acceptance of Islam for fear of persecution by the unbelievers. Had the Muslims attacked Makkah and a fight taken place, the Muslims might have killed some of these since they did not know who they were. This would have meant Muslims killing Muslims; a situation that must be avoided. Moreover, the Muslims would have had to pay blood money to their families when it became known that they were Muslim.

Besides, God knew that among the unbelievers who prevented the Muslims' entry into the Sacred Mosque were some who would be good believers, and who would earn God's mercy. Had these two groups been separated from the rest of the unbelievers, God would have allowed the Muslims to attack and He would have punished the unbelievers severely: "*God will admit to His grace whomever He wills. Had they stood apart, We would have inflicted on the unbelievers among them truly painful suffering.*" (Verse 25)

The *sūrah* then provides a further description of the unbelievers, showing their inner feelings after it has given an account of their apparent deeds: "*The unbelievers fanned fury in their hearts, the fury of ignorance.*" (Verse 26) This was not a passion for a particular faith or code of living, but rather a fury of arrogance and rigidity. This same fury led them to oppose the entry of the Prophet and his Companions to the Sacred Mosque, as also prevented the sacrificial animals from reaching their place of sacrifice. They were thus in breach of every tradition and religion. That they were prepared to commit such a breach had everything to do with their standing among all the Arab tribes so that it could not be said that Muḥammad entered Makkah in spite of them. Because of such ignorant passion, they perpetrated this gross offence against all tradition and all religion. They were prepared to violate the sanctity of the Sacred Mosque, which gave them their own

special position in Arabia, as well as the sanctity of the sacred months, which was observed under Islamic and pre-Islamic traditions. Their fury and ignorance was clearly apparent in their harsh response to everyone who suggested that they pursue a line of compromise, criticizing their plan to prevent Muḥammad and his Companions from entering the Mosque. This fury again manifested itself in the Quraysh negotiator, Suhayl ibn Amr's objection to include in the treaty God's attributes, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful, or the Prophet's status as God's Messenger. Such a hardened attitude could only have been the result of fury, ignorance and arrogance.

God left them to their fury and ignorance because He knew their adamant refusal to submit to the truth. At the same time, He protected the believers from entertaining such passion, giving them instead feelings of tranquillity and piety: "*Meanwhile, God sent down tranquillity on His Messenger and on the believers, and made the word of piety binding on them. They were most worthy of it and deserved it well.*" (Verse 26) Calm tranquillity and piety are fine qualities suited to a believing heart which feels its bond with God, reassured by it. A person with such qualities always places his trust in God, and watches God in everything he says or does. Such a person does not behave arrogantly, nor do they let personal anger get the better of them. Instead, they are only motivated to anger in support of their faith and for God's sake. Therefore, if they are ordered to calm down, they willingly obey.

Therefore, the believers were most worthy and deserving of the word of piety. This is yet another point on which they are commended by God, who favoured them with the tranquillity He bestowed on them. This is all an honour given to them by the One who knows them well: "*God has full knowledge of all things.*" (Verse 26)

The Prophet's True Vision

We have already learnt that some of the Prophet's Companions on this trip, who were delighted with his dream knowing that prophets' dreams always come true, found it hard that his dream should not be fulfilled that year, and that they would be prevented entry to the Sacred Mosque. God assured them, however, that the Prophet's dream was true

Muḥammad ibn Maslamah went ahead with horses and arms until he arrived at Marr al-Ẓahrān, about one day's travel, by camel, from Makkah. There he found a few men from the Quraysh who were greatly worried at what they saw. They thought that he was about to attack Makkah in violation of the peace treaty, which stipulated that there would be no war between the two sides for ten years. When the Prophet encamped at Marr al-Ẓahrān where he could see the idols placed in the Sacred Mosque, he sent all the Muslims' arms, including bows, arrows and spears to a place called Baṭn Ya'juj. He then marched towards Makkah with his Companions having only their swords in their sheaths, as he had promised the people of Makkah.

The Quraysh then sent Mikraz ibn Ḥafṣ at the head of a delegation to the Prophet. They said to him: "Muḥammad, we have never known you to break a promise ever since you were a young child." He asked why they were saying this. They replied: "You are trying to enter the city carrying all your arms; spears, bows and arrows." The Prophet said: "I am not going to carry arms into the city. We have sent them to Baṭn Ya'juj." Mikraz ibn Ḥafṣ then replied: "This is more like what we know of your faithfulness."

Many of the Quraysh nobility left Makkah and went into the surrounding mountains; this because they did not wish to look at the Muslims as they arrived at the city for worship. Indeed, the very sight infuriated them. The rest of the Makkans were either out in the streets or on rooftops looking at the Prophet and his Companions as they entered repeating their phrases that declared their submission to God. The Prophet was riding his she-camel, al-Qaṣwā', which he rode the previous year. His Companion, 'Abdullāh ibn Rawāḥah, held the she-camel's rein and guided its march.

Thus the Prophet's dream came true and God's promise was fulfilled. The following year witnessed the fall of Makkah to Islam, and the divine faith came to reign in Makkah, then throughout the rest of Arabia. Then God's other promise and the other piece of good news were fulfilled: "*It is He who sent His Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth so as to make it prevail over all religions. Sufficient is God as a witness.*" (Verse 28) The religion of truth prevailed, and not only in the Arabian Peninsula. Within half a century it prevailed across much of

the inhabited parts of the earth. It subdued the entire Persian Empire and took over much of the Byzantine Empire. It marched as far as India and China before moving into Malaysia, southern Asia and Indonesia. In the sixth and seventh centuries, these areas constituted most of the then known world.

This true religion continues to prevail over all religions, even after its political retreat from much of the areas it moved into, particularly in Europe and the major islands in the Mediterranean. It prevails even though the power of its people is very weak compared to the new powers that have recently emerged in the East and the West. Indeed, as a religion, Islam prevails over all else. It carries within itself and in its nature the elements of its strength. It moves forward, supported by neither sword nor gun drawn by its people. Its advance is due only to its inherent harmony with human nature and the natural laws of the universe, and to the fact that it satisfies, with perfect ease, the requirements of mind and soul, progress and civilization, regardless of whether people live in tents or in skyscrapers.

Any religious person who looks objectively at Islam is bound to recognise the soundness and inherent strength of this religion. Nor can they help but recognise its ability to lead humanity with wisdom and to answer its progressive needs in an easy and straightforward way: "*Sufficient is God as a witness.*" (Verse 28)

We see, then, that God's promise was fulfilled in the immediate, political form, before one century had elapsed after the Prophet's mission. God's promise continues to be fulfilled in its substantive form, as Islam prevails over all other religions. In fact, it is the only religion that continues to act and lead in all situations. Perhaps only the Muslims do not understand this truth. Other people know it and take it into account as they draw up their policies and programmes.

The Muslim Community

The *sūrah* concludes with a verse that paints a superb picture of the community of the Prophet's Companions, adding God's commendation of that unique and happy group of people who earned His pleasure and who were also informed of that fact:

Muḥammad is God's Messenger; and those who are with him are firm and unyielding towards the unbelievers, full of mercy towards one another. You can see them bowing down, prostrating in prayer, seeking favour with God and His good pleasure. They bear on their faces the marks of their prostrations. This is how they are pictured in the Torah. And in the Gospels, they are like a seed that brings forth its shoot, strengthens it, grows thick and stands firm on its stem, delighting the sowers. Through them God will enrage the unbelievers. To those of them who believe and do righteous deeds God has promised forgiveness and a rich reward. (Verse 29)

This is a remarkable picture drawn by the superior style of the Qur'ān. It includes several snapshots depicting the group's main conditions, both subtle and clearly apparent. One shot portrays their attitude to the unbelievers and to one another. Thus, they are "*firm and unyielding towards the unbelievers, full of mercy towards one another.*" Another shows them as they are in worship: "*You can see them bowing down, prostrating in prayer.*" Yet a third image reveals what preoccupies their minds and characterizes their feelings: "*seeking favour with God and His good pleasure.*" A fourth shot focuses on the apparent effect worship has on their faces as they dedicate all to God: "*They bear on their faces the marks of their prostrations. This is how they are pictured in the Torah.*" A number of additional quick images tell us how they are described in the Gospels: "*They are like a seed that brings forth its shoot; strengthens it; grows thick; stands firm on its stem; delights the sowers; through them God will enrage the unbelievers.*"

The verse begins by confirming the Prophet's status, denied by the Quraysh negotiator, Suhayl ibn 'Amr, and the unbelievers he represented at the time: "*Muḥammad is God's Messenger.*" The verse then goes on to paint its beautiful picture in the unique Qur'ānic style.

Needless to say, the believers go through different conditions and situations during their lifetimes. However, the images shown in the verse concentrate on their permanent features, highlighting these so that they serve as the main lines in the overall picture. The selection of these particular images clearly shows that God wants to bestow honour on this happy community. This is reflected right from the very first image

that depicts them as: "*firm and unyielding towards the unbelievers, full of mercy towards one another.*" They take such a firm and unyielding attitude towards the unbelievers, despite the fact that those unbelievers included their parents, siblings, kinsfolk and friends. However, they severed all these relations with the unbelievers. They are at the same time full of mercy towards one another, when their only bond is brotherhood in faith. This means that in both conditions of unyielding firmness and flowing mercy the determining factor is faith. There is absolutely no personal consideration. Their feelings, emotions, behaviour and bonds are based on faith alone, making them hostile to its opponents, compassionate towards their fellow believers. They discard all selfish thoughts and make their bond with God the only one to which they attach any value.

Again God's wish to honour this community is clearly apparent in making prominent their condition as they worship: "*You can see them bowing down, prostrating in prayer.*" The way this is portrayed suggests that this is their permanent condition, one that we see whenever we look at them. In fact, bowing and prostration represent the condition of worship, which is the core feature of their personality. Therefore, it is expressed in a way that makes it permanent during their time, as if they spent their whole lives bowing and prostrating.

The same applies to the third image, which concentrates on their inner thoughts and feelings: "*seeking favour with God and His good pleasure.*" Such are their permanent feelings and what always preoccupies them. All they aspire for is God's favour and earning His pleasure.

The fourth image focuses on how apparent worship and inner feelings are reflected in their appearances: "*They bear on their faces the marks of their prostrations.*" Their faces shine with transparent clarity and the warmth that worship imparts. This is not a reference to the dark mark associated with prayer that appears on the foreheads of some people, as people may wrongly think when they hear the words, '*the marks of their prostration.*' What this expression refers to is the mark of worship, which is symbolized here by prostration as it expresses submission to God in the clearest form. The mark of this submission is seen on their faces; in other words there is no trace of pride, arrogance or selfishness. Instead, what is reflected is noble humility, purity and a serenity that adds to the shine on a believer's face.

This bright overall picture contains nothing new. It is also painted in the Torah as God gave the world the news of the emergence of this community of the Prophet's Companions.

The Gospels give another picture of Muḥammad and his community, describing them as "*And in the Gospels, they are like a seed that brings forth its shoot.*" It is a fertile seed that sends forth its shoot which does not weaken the stalk. On the contrary, it "*strengthens it*", or the shoot may be strengthened by the stalk. Thus the plant "*grows thick*", and its stem acquires strength and structure. The plant now "*stands firm on its stem*", upright, neither bending nor crooked. This is how the plant looks, but what feeling does it give to farmers who can immediately distinguish a fine plant that is bound to yield fruit? It gives them a feeling of pleasure: "*delighting the sowers*". A variant reading of this phrase puts the delighted onlookers in the singular, '*delighting the sower,*' which in this case refers to the Prophet, as he was the one that looked after the seeds until they harvested a noble and delightful community that was unique in history. The unbelievers experience a different feeling as they look on: "*Through them God will enrage the unbelievers.*" Sending such a feeling of rage into the unbelievers' hearts is clearly intended. It suggests that the planting was by God or by His Messenger, so as to yield a harvest that accomplishes God's purpose in enraging His enemies.

Again this picture is nothing new. It was painted before Muḥammad and his Companions began to walk the earth, in the Gospels as they herald the happy event of God sending Muḥammad with His final message.

Thus does God record in His book the qualities of this select group of the Prophet's Companions, so that it will be recognized by all creation. It remains the ideal and the role model for future generations, as the standard of faith they should emulate.

In addition to all this honour, God gives them a promise of forgiveness for their sins and a supreme reward: "*To those of them who believe and do righteous deeds God has promised forgiveness and a rich reward.*" The promise is given in such general terms after highlighting their special features so as to make them the first to whom the general description applies. The honour granted them is more than enough for anyone, but God's favours and bounty are limitless, unending. Therefore, they are granted forgiveness and a rich reward.

Once more I try today, fourteen centuries after the event, to visualize the beaming faces and rejoicing hearts of those people as they received this great honour and promise bestowed on them by God. I try to see them as they look at their own picture painted by God in His book. I look at them as they are on their way back from al-Ḥudaybiyah, when this *sūrah* was revealed and relayed to them; how they reflected on it, and how it touched their hearts and souls. I see them looking at one another, with each one seeing in his brother the mark of the grace he himself feels. I try again and again to live with them a moment of this splendid festival they experienced, but how can one who was not present there share all that, except from afar? It can only be by a special favour of God's grace, bringing close that which is indeed far. Lord! You know that I aspire to a special gift of this unique favour.

SŪRAH 49

Al-Ḥujurāt

(Compartments)

Prologue

This *sūrah*, composed of no more than 18 verses, is majestic, indeed superior. It includes a number of basic facts of faith, Islamic law and human existence. It opens up before our hearts and minds wide horizons and gives rise to a host of important thoughts. It refers to systems of formation and organization, principles of education and upbringing, fundamentals of legislation and essential directives which could take a hundred times its length. It puts before our eyes two great issues for reflection and deliberation.

The first thing that appears to us when we read this *sūrah* is that it lays down, almost independently, a complete sketch of a noble world, free of anything that may be described as unbecoming. It outlines the principles, concepts and approaches that form the foundation of this world, ensuring first that it comes into being, and then its continuity. This world derives its *raison d'etre* from God, looks up to God and is fit to be attributed to God. It is a world that combines purity of intention and feeling with a keen sense of propriety in what it says, feels and thinks. It maintains a high standard of morality and good manners in its dealings with God, His Messenger, its own affairs and interaction with others. This sense of morality penetrates into its deepest thoughts and manifests itself in its actions.

At the same time it has laws and regulations that ensure its continuity. These laws and regulations are based on its morality, emanate from it and fit with it. Thus this world benefits from such consistency of deep reality and surface appearance, the compatibility of its laws and feelings, the equilibrium between motives and checks, and the harmony between feelings and actions as it turns to God, appealing to Him. Hence, the existence and continuity of this noble and pure world are not left either to fine feelings and a sensitive conscience or to law and legislation. Nor are the establishment and maintenance of this world left to either the feelings and efforts of the individual or to the measures and systems of the state. Indeed, both individual and state have to work side by side, so that their efforts and duties complement each other in perfect harmony.

This world observes a certain code of behaviour with God and His Messenger, one that requires that everyone realizes his or her limits in relation to their Lord, and in relation to the Messenger who conveys His message: "*Believers! Do not behave presumptuously in the presence of God and His Messenger. Have fear of God: God hears all and knows all.*" (Verse 1) Thus a servant of God does not precipitate His orders or prohibitions; nor does he or she suggest to Him any judgement or ruling. They neither exceed the limits of what God orders or prohibits, nor show that they have a will or an opinion independent from those of their Creator. This code is motivated by an attitude that combines fearing God with being modest and observing appropriate values in dealing with Him. Believers also observe special values when they address God's Messenger [peace be upon him]: "*Believers! Do not raise your voices above the voice of the Prophet, nor speak loudly to him as you would speak loudly to one another, lest all your deeds should come to nothing without your perceiving it. Those who lower their voices in the presence of God's Messenger are the ones whose hearts God has tested for piety. Forgiveness and a rich reward await them. Those who call out to you from without your private apartments are for the most part people who do not use their reason. If they had the patience to wait until you went out to them, it would be for their own good. Still, God is much forgiving, merciful.*" (Verses 2–5)

This noble world sets a well-defined approach for verifying what people may say or do, determining their accuracy before making any

judgement. This approach relies on fearing God and putting all matters to God's Messenger, without precipitating his judgement or suggesting to him what he has neither ordered nor recommended: "*Believers! If any evildoer comes to you with a piece of news, make sure of it first, lest you should wrong others unwittingly and then regret your action. And know that God's Messenger is among you. Were he to comply with your inclinations in many a case, you would surely come to harm. But God has caused [your] faith to be dear to you, and has given it beauty in your hearts, and has made hateful to you unbelief, wrongdoing and disobedience to God. Such indeed are they who follow the right course. [All this is indeed part of] God's bounty and favour. God is all-knowing, truly wise.*" (Verses 6–8)

This noble world has its own rules and practical measures in sorting out any differences, conflicts and excesses that may occur within it, realizing that unless these are properly dealt with, they may undermine its very structure. Hence, it sets out certain procedures for dealing with them based on three main criteria: (1) that all believers are brethren; (2) that justice and peace must be maintained, and (3) that all believers are God-fearing and their goal is to earn God's pleasure and mercy. "*If two groups of believers fall to fighting, make peace between them. But then, if one of the two goes on acting wrongfully towards the other, fight against the one that acts wrongfully until it reverts to God's commandment; and if they revert, make peace between them with justice, and deal equitably with them. Indeed, God loves those who act equitably. All believers are but brothers. Hence, make peace between your two brothers, and remain God-fearing, so that you may receive [God's] mercy.*" (Verses 9–10)

Moreover, certain moral values apply in shaping the feelings of people in this world towards one another and in their behaviour towards each other. "*Believers! No men shall deride other men: it may well be that those [whom they deride] are better than themselves. And no women [shall deride other] women: it may well be that those [whom they deride] are better than themselves. And neither shall you deface one another, nor insult one another by [opprobrious] epithets. Ill-seeming is a name connoting wickedness [to be used of one] after he has believed. Those who do not repent are indeed wrongdoers.*" (Verse 11)

It is a world with healthy feelings, guaranteed rights, where people's integrity is valued in both their presence and absence. No one is

condemned on suspicion. None seeks to publicize another's shortcomings. People's safety, security, integrity and freedom are fully respected by all. "*Believers! Avoid suspicion as much as possible, for, some such suspicion is a sin. And do not spy on one another, nor backbite one another. Would any of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? Surely you would loathe it. And remain God-fearing. God is certainly the One who accepts repentance, and He is merciful.*" (Verse 12)

In this noble world a complete concept of mankind's unity, despite its divergent races and communities, prevails. A single standard of evaluation, free of prejudice and error, applies to all people. "*Mankind! We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another. Truly, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most genuinely God-fearing. God is all-knowing, all-aware.*" (Verse 13)

Having presented these fundamental concepts that ensures this noble world maintains a high standard of purity, the *sūrah* embarks on drawing an outline of the faith by which believers are called upon to establish this world. Indeed, it is by their quality of faith that they are required to rise to the task and see to its fulfilment. This is the quality that distinguishes them from others and motivates them to respond and submit. They are addressed by their quality of having faith, '*Believers*!' Anyone who is so addressed by God will be so embarrassed not to give the right response. It is an address that makes any duty, hard and demanding as it may be, easy to fulfil. Indeed hearts will be all too eager to listen and respond: "*The Bedouin say: 'We have attained to faith.' Say [to them]: 'Believers you are not. Rather say, "We have submitted ourselves", for true faith has not entered your hearts. But if you truly pay heed to God and His Messenger, He will let nothing of your deeds go to waste. God is indeed much-forgiving, merciful.' True believers are only those who have believed in God and His Messenger, and never then entertained any doubt, and who strive hard in God's cause with their possessions and their lives. Those are the ones who are true to their word. Say: Do you, perchance, want to inform God of your faith, when God knows all that is in the heavens and earth? Indeed, God has full knowledge of everything.*" (Verses 14–16)

Before it closes, the *sūrah* shows how great the favour God has bestowed on humanity is. It is the gift of faith with which God favours

people according to what He knows of what they deserve. "*They think that they have bestowed a favour upon you by having embraced Islam. Say: 'Do not count your embrace of Islam a favour to me. It is indeed God who bestows a favour upon you by showing you the way to faith, if you are men of truth.' God certainly knows the hidden reality of the heavens and the earth; and God sees all that you do.*" (Verses 17–18)

The second very important thing that appears clearly to us when we read the *sūrah* and review the actual events leading to its revelation is the great and unwavering effort, represented by Qur'ānic verses and the Prophet's directives, to establish and educate the first Muslim community. Indeed it is the community that represents that noble world, providing a practical model of it. Thus, it is no longer a mere ideal that lingers in people's dreams and imaginations.

This community, which existed during a certain period of history, did not come into existence suddenly or by chance. It did not owe its existence to a sudden change in the nature of all things. Instead, it went through a process of natural and slow growth, like a great tree that stretches its roots deep into the earth and spreads its branches wide into the air. It took the necessary time to complete its growth and benefited from steady and consistent effort to ensure that growth. Patient care, penetrating insight, careful motivation, steady encouragement and far-sighted strengthening were also provided. Moreover, it needed to go through hard and testing experiences and to learn important lessons from such experiences. In all this we see the kind of care God took of that community. He in His wisdom chose to fulfil a great trust, thus bringing His will to pass. Yet that community had its own virtues and potentials that only needed to be brought into full play. All this worked together to bring about such remarkable light in human history and to start, in reality, a situation that seems closer to an imaginary world.

Al-Ḥujurāt (Compartments)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

Believers! Do not behave presumptuously in the presence of God and His Messenger. Have fear of God: God hears all and knows all. (1)

يَـٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ لَا تُقَدِّمُوا۟ بَيْنَ يَدَىِ ٱللَّهِ
وَرَسُولِهِۦ ۖ وَٱتَّقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ سَمِيعٌ عَلِيمٌ ١

Believers! Do not raise your voices above the voice of the Prophet, nor speak loudly to him as you would speak loudly to one another, lest all your deeds should come to nothing without your perceiving it. (2)

يَـٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ لَا تَرْفَعُوٓا۟ أَصْوَٰتَكُمْ
فَوْقَ صَوْتِ ٱلنَّبِىِّ وَلَا تَجْهَرُوا۟ لَهُۥ بِٱلْقَوْلِ
كَجَهْرِ بَعْضِكُمْ لِبَعْضٍ أَن تَحْبَطَ
أَعْمَـٰلُكُمْ وَأَنتُمْ لَا تَشْعُرُونَ ٢

Those who lower their voices in the presence of God's Messenger are the ones whose hearts God has tested for piety. Forgiveness and a rich reward await them. (3)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ يَغُضُّونَ أَصْوَٰتَهُمْ عِندَ رَسُولِ
ٱللَّهِ أُو۟لَـٰٓئِكَ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱمْتَحَنَ ٱللَّهُ قُلُوبَهُمْ
لِلتَّقْوَىٰ ۚ لَهُم مَّغْفِرَةٌ وَأَجْرٌ عَظِيمٌ ٣

Those who call out to you from without your private apartments are for the most part people who do not use their reason. (4)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ يُنَادُونَكَ مِن وَرَآءِ ٱلْحُجُرَٰتِ
أَكْثَرُهُمْ لَا يَعْقِلُونَ ٤

If they had the patience to wait until you went out to them, it would be for their own good. Still, God is much forgiving, merciful. (5)

وَلَوْ أَنَّهُمْ صَبَرُوا۟ حَتَّىٰ تَخْرُجَ إِلَيْهِمْ لَكَانَ
خَيْرًا لَّهُمْ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ٥

Believers! If any evildoer comes to you with a piece of news, make sure of it first, lest you should wrong others unwittingly and then regret your action. (6)

يَـٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓا۟ إِن جَآءَكُمْ فَاسِقٌۢ بِنَبَإٍ فَتَبَيَّنُوٓا۟ أَن تُصِيبُوا۟ قَوْمًۢا بِجَهَـٰلَةٍ فَتُصْبِحُوا۟ عَلَىٰ مَا فَعَلْتُمْ نَـٰدِمِينَ ﴿٦﴾

And know that God's Messenger is among you. Were he to comply with your inclinations in many a case, you would surely come to harm. But God has caused [your] faith to be dear to you, and has given it beauty in your hearts, and has made hateful to you unbelief, wrongdoing and disobedience to God. Such indeed are they who follow the right course. (7)

وَٱعْلَمُوٓا۟ أَنَّ فِيكُمْ رَسُولَ ٱللَّهِ ۚ لَوْ يُطِيعُكُمْ فِى كَثِيرٍ مِّنَ ٱلْأَمْرِ لَعَنِتُّمْ وَلَـٰكِنَّ ٱللَّهَ حَبَّبَ إِلَيْكُمُ ٱلْإِيمَـٰنَ وَزَيَّنَهُۥ فِى قُلُوبِكُمْ وَكَرَّهَ إِلَيْكُمُ ٱلْكُفْرَ وَٱلْفُسُوقَ وَٱلْعِصْيَانَ ۚ أُو۟لَـٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلرَّٰشِدُونَ ﴿٧﴾

[All this is indeed part of] God's bounty and favour. God is all-knowing, truly wise. (8)

فَضْلًا مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ وَنِعْمَةً ۚ وَٱللَّهُ عَلِيمٌ حَكِيمٌ ﴿٨﴾

If two groups of believers fall to fighting, make peace between them. But then, if one of the two goes on acting wrongfully towards the other, fight against the one that acts wrongfully until it reverts to God's commandment; and if they revert, make peace between them with justice, and deal equitably with them. Indeed, God loves those who act equitably. (9)

وَإِن طَآئِفَتَانِ مِنَ ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ٱقْتَتَلُوا۟ فَأَصْلِحُوا۟ بَيْنَهُمَا ۖ فَإِنۢ بَغَتْ إِحْدَىٰهُمَا عَلَى ٱلْأُخْرَىٰ فَقَـٰتِلُوا۟ ٱلَّتِى تَبْغِى حَتَّىٰ تَفِىٓءَ إِلَىٰٓ أَمْرِ ٱللَّهِ ۚ فَإِن فَآءَتْ فَأَصْلِحُوا۟ بَيْنَهُمَا بِٱلْعَدْلِ وَأَقْسِطُوٓا۟ ۖ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يُحِبُّ ٱلْمُقْسِطِينَ ﴿٩﴾

All believers are but brothers. Hence, make peace between your two brothers, and remain God-fearing, so that you may receive [God's] mercy. (10)

إِنَّمَا ٱلْمُؤْمِنُونَ إِخْوَةٌ فَأَصْلِحُوا۟ بَيْنَ أَخَوَيْكُمْ ۚ وَٱتَّقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تُرْحَمُونَ ﴿١٠﴾

Believers! No men shall deride other men: it may well be that those [whom they deride] are better than themselves. And no women [shall deride other] women: it may well be that those [whom they deride] are better than themselves. And neither shall you defame yourselves, nor insult one another by [opprobrious] epithets. Ill-seeming is a name connoting wickedness [to be used of one] after he has believed. Those who do not repent are indeed wrongdoers. (11)

يَـٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ لَا يَسْخَرْ قَوْمٌ مِّن قَوْمٍ عَسَىٰٓ أَن يَكُونُوا۟ خَيْرًا مِّنْهُمْ وَلَا نِسَآءٌ مِّن نِّسَآءٍ عَسَىٰٓ أَن يَكُنَّ خَيْرًا مِّنْهُنَّ ۖ وَلَا تَلْمِزُوٓا۟ أَنفُسَكُمْ وَلَا تَنَابَزُوا۟ بِٱلْأَلْقَـٰبِ ۖ بِئْسَ ٱلِٱسْمُ ٱلْفُسُوقُ بَعْدَ ٱلْإِيمَـٰنِ ۚ وَمَن لَّمْ يَتُبْ فَأُو۟لَـٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلظَّـٰلِمُونَ ﴿١١﴾

Believers! Avoid suspicion as much as possible, for, some such suspicion is a sin. And do not spy on one another, nor backbite one another. Would any of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? Surely you would loathe it. And remain God-fearing. God is certainly the One who accepts repentance, and He is merciful. (12)

يَـٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ ٱجْتَنِبُوا۟ كَثِيرًا مِّنَ ٱلظَّنِّ إِنَّ بَعْضَ ٱلظَّنِّ إِثْمٌ ۖ وَلَا تَجَسَّسُوا۟ وَلَا يَغْتَب بَّعْضُكُم بَعْضًا ۚ أَيُحِبُّ أَحَدُكُمْ أَن يَأْكُلَ لَحْمَ أَخِيهِ مَيْتًا فَكَرِهْتُمُوهُ ۚ وَٱتَّقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ تَوَّابٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿١٢﴾

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقۡنَٰكُم مِّن ذَكَرٖ وَأُنثَىٰ وَجَعَلۡنَٰكُمۡ شُعُوبٗا وَقَبَآئِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوٓاْۚ إِنَّ أَكۡرَمَكُمۡ عِندَ ٱللَّهِ أَتۡقَىٰكُمۡۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٞ ﴿١٣﴾

Mankind! We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another. Truly, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most genuinely God-fearing. God is all-knowing, all-aware. (13)

قَالَتِ ٱلۡأَعۡرَابُ ءَامَنَّاۖ قُل لَّمۡ تُؤۡمِنُواْ وَلَٰكِن قُولُوٓاْ أَسۡلَمۡنَا وَلَمَّا يَدۡخُلِ ٱلۡإِيمَٰنُ فِي قُلُوبِكُمۡۖ وَإِن تُطِيعُواْ ٱللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُۥ لَا يَلِتۡكُم مِّنۡ أَعۡمَٰلِكُمۡ شَيۡـًٔاۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ غَفُورٞ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿١٤﴾

The Bedouin say: "We have attained to faith." Say [to them]: "Believers you are not. Rather say, 'We have submitted ourselves', for true faith has not entered your hearts. But if you truly pay heed to God and His Messenger, He will let nothing of your deeds go to waste. God is indeed much-forgiving, merciful." (14)

إِنَّمَا ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنُونَ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ بِٱللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِۦ ثُمَّ لَمۡ يَرۡتَابُواْ وَجَٰهَدُواْ بِأَمۡوَٰلِهِمۡ وَأَنفُسِهِمۡ فِي سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِۚ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلصَّٰدِقُونَ ﴿١٥﴾

True believers are only those who have believed in God and His Messenger, and never then entertained any doubt, and who strive hard in God's cause with their possessions and their lives. Those are the ones who are true to their word. (15)

قُلۡ أَتُعَلِّمُونَ ٱللَّهَ بِدِينِكُمۡ وَٱللَّهُ يَعۡلَمُ مَا فِي ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَمَا فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِۚ وَٱللَّهُ بِكُلِّ شَيۡءٍ عَلِيمٞ ﴿١٦﴾

Say: "Do you, perchance, want to inform God of your faith, when God knows all that is in the heavens and earth? Indeed, God has full knowledge of everything." (16)

They think that they have bestowed a favour upon you by having embraced Islam. Say: "Do not count your embrace of Islam a favour to me. It is indeed God who bestows a favour upon you by showing you the way to faith, if you are men of truth." (17)

يَمُنُّونَ عَلَيْكَ أَنْ أَسْلَمُوا ۖ قُل لَّا تَمُنُّوا عَلَيَّ إِسْلَامَكُم ۖ بَلِ اللَّهُ يَمُنُّ عَلَيْكُمْ أَنْ هَدَاكُمْ لِلْإِيمَانِ إِن كُنتُمْ صَادِقِينَ ﴿١٧﴾

God certainly knows the hidden reality of the heavens and the earth; and God sees all that you do. (18)

إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَعْلَمُ غَيْبَ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ ۚ وَاللَّهُ بَصِيرٌ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٨﴾

Refining Rough Manners

> *Believers! Do not behave presumptuously in the presence of God and His Messenger. Have fear of God: God hears all and knows all. Believers! Do not raise your voices above the voice of the Prophet, nor speak loudly to him as you would speak loudly to one another, lest all your deeds should come to nothing without your perceiving it. Those who lower their voices in the presence of God's Messenger are the ones whose hearts God has tested for piety. Forgiveness and a rich reward await them. Those who call out to you from without your private apartments are for the most part people who do not use their reason. If they had the patience to wait until you went out to them, it would be for their own good. Still, God is much forgiving, merciful.* (Verses 1–5)

The *sūrah* starts with this first loving address that aims to alert hearts: "*Believers*!" It is an address by God to those who believe in Him, touching their hearts by highlighting the bond they have with Him, making them aware that they belong to Him, carry His mark, do His bidding and are His soldiers. They realize that they are in this world for a purpose He wants to accomplish. If He has made faith appealing to them and seem beautiful in their eyes, as part of His favour, it behoves them to stand

where He wants them to be, awaiting His orders and judgement. They should be glad to do His bidding in full submission to Him: *"Believers! Do not behave presumptuously in the presence of God and His Messenger. Have fear of God: God hears all and knows all."* (Verse 1)

Believers, do not make any suggestion to God or His Messenger, concerning any of your affairs or of life in general. Do not presume to have a say in any matter before God has stated, through His Messenger, what He wants concerning it. Do not attempt to judge any matter unless you first refer to what God and His Messenger say.

Qatādah says: "It has been reported that some people used to say: 'If there was some revelation concerning such and such,' or, 'If it could thus be true.' God disliked such suggestions." Al-'Awfī says: "They were told not to start speaking in his presence." Mujāhid says: "The verse orders believers not to precipitate what the Prophet might say. They must wait until God made His judgement clear through His Messenger." Al-Dhaḥḥāk says: "Do not make a judgement on any question relating to your faith without waiting for the judgement of God and His Messenger." Ibn 'Abbās is reported to have said: "Do not say anything that is not in line with the Qur'ān and the *Sunnah.*"

Thus, we see that it is all a question of a psychological attitude defining the standards to be observed in relation to God and His Messenger, and the process by which instructions are received and carried out. This is an essential part of how Islamic law is enacted and implemented. It is all based on an essential God-fearing quality and its reinforcement. This quality stems from the awareness that God hears all and knows all. Furthermore, this all-embracing truth is incorporated into one single, short verse.

The believers applied this standard to their relationship with their Lord and His Messenger. None of them would ever presume to suggest anything to God or His Messenger. None would voice an opinion unless God's Messenger asked him to do so. None would make a judgement concerning any matter without first referring to what God and His Messenger said about it.

Imām Aḥmad, Abū Dāwūd, al-Tirmidhī and Ibn Mājah relate that the Prophet asked Mu'ādh when he appointed him Governor of Yemen: "How will you judge?" Mu'ādh said: "According to God's book." The

Prophet asked: "What if you do not find in it what you need?" Mu'ādh answered: "Then according to the Sunnah of God's Messenger." Again the Prophet asked: "And if you do not find something relevant in that?" Mu'ādh replied: "In this case, I will exercise my judgement as best as I can." The Prophet put his hand on Mu'ādh's chest and said: "Praise be to God for guiding the messenger of God's Messenger to what pleases His Messenger." After the revelation of this verse, the Prophet might ask his Companions about their day and the places they had been to, but even then, they would hesitate to give an answer other than: "God and His Messenger know best." They feared that a direct answer might be treated as presumption in the presence of God and His Messenger.

When Speaking to the Prophet

In a *ḥadīth* reported by Abū Bakarah Nafi' ibn al-Ḥārith mentions that during his pilgrimage, the Prophet asked his Companions: "'Which month is this?' We said: 'God and His Messenger know best.' He was silent until we thought that he would give it a different name. But he said: 'Is it not Dhū'l-Ḥijjah?' We said: 'Yes.' He then asked: 'Which city is this?' We said: 'God and His Messenger know best.' Again, he was silent until we thought that he would call it by a different name, but then he said: 'Is it not the sanctified city?' We said: 'Yes, indeed.' So he went on and asked: 'What day is today?' We replied: 'God and His Messenger know best.' Once more he remained silent until we thought that he would give it a different name, but then he said: 'Is it not the day of sacrifice?' We answered in the affirmative..." This is, then, an example of the standard the Prophet's Companions achieved in their God-fearing manners when they heard this instruction coupled with the order to maintain their fear of God, who hears all and knows all.

The second aspect of good manners concerned the Prophet's Companions' own discourse with him and the respect they should feel and show. This was to be observed in how they spoke to him and in the level of their voices. This was how they should manifest their respect for the Prophet as they sat with him. As God drew their attention to this requirement, He addressed them by that quality they loved to have and warned them that violation of His orders might bring grievous

consequences in its wake: *"Believers! Do not raise your voices above the voice of the Prophet, nor speak loudly to him as you would speak loudly to one another, lest all your deeds should come to nothing without your perceiving it."* (Verse 2)

This kindly address coupled with its awesome warning had their profound effect on the Prophet's Companions. Al-Bukhārī reports that Abū Mulaykah said: "The two goodly ones, Abū Bakr and 'Umar [may God be pleased with them], were in a perilous situation, as they raised their voices in the presence of the Prophet. When the delegation of the Tamīm tribe arrived [in the ninth year of the Islamic calendar] one of them suggested al-Aqra' ibn Ḥābis [to be appointed as their chief], while the other suggested another man. [One reporter says that he does not remember the name of this second man, while another reporter mentions that he was al-Qa'qā' ibn Ma'bad.] Abū Bakr said to 'Umar: 'You merely want to oppose me.' The other replied: 'I do not wish to oppose you.' They were soon speaking loudly. The verse was revealed saying: *'Believers! Do not raise your voices above the voice of the Prophet, nor speak loudly to him as you would speak loudly to one another, lest all your deeds should come to nothing without your perceiving it.'* (Verse 2) Ibn al-Zubayr says that after its revelation 'Umar would hardly use an audible voice when he spoke to the Prophet until the Prophet asked him to speak up. It is also reported that when this verse was revealed, Abū Bakr said to the Prophet: 'God's Messenger, I will only speak to you in a whisper.'

Imām Aḥmad relates on the authority of Anas ibn Mālik that when this verse was revealed, Thābit ibn Qays, a man with a high-pitched voice thought: "I was the one who raised his voice in the presence of God's Messenger. I am destined to hell, because my deeds have come to waste." He stayed at home depressed. The Prophet noticed his absence and asked about him. Some people went to him and told him that the Prophet had asked about his absence. He said to them: "I am the one who raised his voice above the voice of the Prophet and spoke loudly to him. All my deeds are wasted. I am destined to hell." They went to the Prophet informing him of what Thābit had said. The Prophet said: "No. He certainly belongs to heaven." Anas says: "We subsequently saw him walking among us, knowing that he was certain to go to heaven."

Thus they felt a tremor in their hearts as they listened to this endearing address and its stern warning. Hence, they observed a high standard of fine manners in the Prophet's presence for fear that their deeds would come to nothing.

God praises their piety and lowered voices when they are with the Prophet in an unusual expression: *"Those who lower their voices in the presence of God's Messenger are the ones whose hearts God has tested for piety. Forgiveness and a rich reward await them."* (Verse 3) Piety that manifests itself in a God-fearing attitude is a great gift God grants to certain hearts He chooses after initially testing them. It is thus implanted only in hearts that are suited to it, having first proven their merit. Those who lower their voices in the presence of God's Messenger are they who have proven themselves in a test of hearts. They are the ones who fear God, a quality that earns them forgiveness and a rich reward from God.

Here, then, is a tempting invitation that follows a stern warning. Both are part of how God educated and prepared his chosen servants for the great task that first generation of Muslims undertook.

It is reported that 'Umar heard two people speaking loudly in the Prophet's Mosque. He went to them and said: "Do you realize where you are? Where do you come from?" They said to him: "We come from Ṭā'if." He said: "Had you been from Madīnah, I would have had you soundly beaten."

Islamic scholars, having realized the extent of this injunction, state that it is reprehensible to raise one's voice near the Prophet's grave in the same way as it was reprehensible to do so in his presence. In this way, Muslims demonstrate their respect for the Prophet in all situations.

The ninth year of the Islamic calendar is called 'The year of delegations' because delegations from all over Arabia arrived in Madīnah to embrace Islam and pledge their loyalty to the Prophet. The *sūrah* refers to an incident that took place that year when the delegation of Tamīm arrived. These were unrefined Bedouins. They shouted to the Prophet from outside his wives' apartments that were situated next to the mosque: "Muḥammad, come out and speak to us!" The Prophet disliked their uncivilized manner. Hence, the next verse of the *sūrah* was revealed: *"Those who call out to you from without your private apartments are for the most part people who do not use their reason. If they had the patience*

to wait until you went out to them, it would be for their own good. Still, God is much forgiving, merciful." (Verses 4–5)

Thus does God describe most of them as being without reason. He censures their calling out to the Prophet in a way that is contrary to the sort of respect that should be shown to God's Messenger, the leader and educator of the community of believers. He explains to them that it better behoved them to wait patiently until the Prophet came out to them of his own accord. Furthermore, the *sūrah* highlights to them the value of repentance, making it clear that they should seek God's forgiveness and pray to Him to bestow His mercy on them.

Muslims have shown their awareness of this high standard of refinement, extending it to every teacher and scholar. They would not disturb their teachers or impose themselves on them until they came out or called them in. Abū 'Ubayd, a pious and reliable scholar of *Ḥadīth*, says: "I never knocked at the door of any scholar, but waited patiently until he came out in his own good time."

Making Sure Before Taking Action

> *Believers! If any evildoer comes to you with a piece of news, make sure of it first, lest you should wrong others unwittingly and then regret your action. And know that God's Messenger is among you. Were he to comply with your inclinations in many a case, you would surely come to harm. But God has caused [your] faith to be dear to you, and has given it beauty in your hearts, and has made hateful to you unbelief, wrongdoing and disobedience to God. Such indeed are they who follow the right course. [All this is indeed part of] God's bounty and favour. God is all-knowing, truly wise.* (Verses 6–8)

The first address in the *sūrah* defines the leadership and the source from which to receive orders. The second establishes the standards of manners and respect to be maintained in dealing with this leadership. Both serve as the basis for all legislations and directives that follow in the *sūrah*. It is imperative for the source and the leadership to be well defined so that directives and instructions be given their true value and

so that they are properly obeyed. Hence, the third address explains to the believers how to receive news and reports and the need to verify their reliability. *"Believers! If any evildoer comes to you with a piece of news, make sure of it first, lest you should wrong others unwittingly and then regret your action."* (Verse 6)

The verse specifically mentions the evildoer because he is more likely to lie. It is important that suspicion should not be widely spread in the Muslim community. If every report is doubted, the system of gathering intelligence and information becomes paralyzed. In a Muslim community, individuals are normally treated as trustworthy, and the information they bring is considered reliable. An evildoer is treated differently: his information is not accepted until it is verified. Thus, the community steers a middle way between accepting and rejecting the information relayed to it. The community does not rush into action on the basis of a report given by someone whose behaviour leaves much to be desired. Such rash action might lead to committing a wrong against other people, and subsequent regret. Furthermore, such rash action may incur God's displeasure and put the community in a position of committing an injustice.

A number of commentators on the Qur'ān mention that this verse specifically referred to al-Walīd ibn 'Uqbah ibn Abū Mu'ayṭ when the Prophet sent him to collect *zakāt* from the tribe of al-Muṣṭalaq. Ibn Kathīr quotes a report by Mujāhid and Qatādah, stating: "God's Messenger sent al-Walīd ibn 'Uqbah to al-Muṣṭalaq tribe to collect their *zakāt* and they paid it to him. When he returned he reported to the Prophet that the tribe was raising a force to attack the Muslims. [In his report, Qatādah also states that al-Walīd added that the al-Muṣṭalaq tribe had renounced the Islamic faith.] The Prophet then sent Khālid ibn al-Walīd to them, ordering him to make sure of the information before taking any action. Khālid so went out to them arriving at night and sending out a number of soldiers to gather information. When they returned, they reported to him that the tribe were adhering to their Islamic faith and that they heard the call to prayer and saw people praying. In the morning, Khālid made his appearance at the tribe's quarters and saw what pleased him. He then returned to the Prophet and reported all this to him. Thereafter, this verse was then revealed."

Qatādah says that the Prophet used to say afterwards: "Verification complies with God's orders, while haste comes from Satan."

The import of this verse is general, making it clear that checking the accuracy of reports given by suspect people is necessary. On the other hand, a report by a God-fearing person is taken as correct, because this is the normal state of affairs in the Muslim community. A report by an evildoer is the exception, not the norm. Indeed, accepting reports by God-fearing people is part of proper verification and checking. To make doubt the norm, applicable to all sources and reports, is contrary to the principle of trust that is basic to the Muslim community. Furthermore, it could easily cause disruption in its life. Islam allows life to run its normal course while putting in place certain controls that guarantee its protection. Here we see how this operates in practice.

Making Life Too Hard

It appears that some Muslims wanted to take immediate action when they heard the first news reported by al-Walīd ibn 'Uqbah. They advised the Prophet to immediately punish the al-Muṣṭalaq tribe. In doing so, they were motivated by a keen desire to ensure the status of Islam and to act against those who refused to pay *zakāt*. The next verse reminds them of the great blessing they had, namely the Prophet's presence in their midst. They should appreciate this blessing and be always mindful of its importance: "*And know that God's Messenger is among you.*" (Verse 7)

This is a reality that we can very easily imagine because it actually happened. However, when we reflect on it, we see that it is superior, beyond imagination. Is it easy to imagine a continuous, dynamic contact between heaven and earth, witnessed by all, whereby heaven speaks to people on earth about their public and private affairs, correcting their errors one by one, and giving them advice about their most intimate affairs? Any one of them might do or say something, or even entertain a thought, and yet heaven is aware of it all. What happens next is that God informs His Messenger of what has taken place and directs him to do or say whatever is necessary about it. This is something so great that it might not be fully appreciated by some of those present at the time. Hence, they are reminded of it in this particular way: "*And know*

that God's Messenger is among you." (Verse 7) In other words, be aware of this fact and give it its due importance.

One outcome of this new-found knowledge is that they must not act presumptuously in the presence of God and His Messenger. The Qur'ān, however, puts this even more lucidly and forcefully, telling the Muslims that what God's Messenger decides on any matter, on the basis of God's revelation or inspiration, is good for them as it combines ease and mercy. Had God's Messenger obeyed all their thoughts, they would have found matters far more difficult. God is more aware than them of what is of benefit to them. His Messenger represents mercy in everything he chooses for them: "*Were he to comply with your inclinations in many a case, you would surely come to harm.*" (Verse 7) This implies that they should leave all their affairs in the hands of God and His Messenger. They should submit fully, surrendering themselves to God's will, implementing His orders as they receive them, and suggesting nothing to God's Messenger.

The *sūrah* then draws their attention to the grace of faith He guided them to, making their hearts warm to it as He revealed its beauty and benefit such that they would love it dearly. He has also made unbelief, wrongdoing and sin hateful to them. All this is part of God's grace which He bestows on them: "*But God has caused [your] faith to be dear to you, and has given it beauty in your hearts, and has made hateful to you unbelief, wrongdoing and disobedience to God. Such indeed are they who follow the right course. [All this is indeed part of] God's bounty and favour. God is all-knowing, truly wise.*" (Verses 7–8)

That God should select certain individuals from among His servants and grant them all this represents His immeasurable bounty and grace. Indeed, all other types of grace and bounty, including that which brings people into existence and gives them life, seem to dwindle by comparison to what faith represents. Later in the *sūrah* we will look in detail at God's words: "*It is indeed God who bestows a favour upon you by showing you the way to faith, if you are men of truth.*" (Verse 17)

What is particularly significant here is that they are reminded that it is God who has willed that they should have all this bounty. It is He who has rid their hearts of all the evil of unbelief, wrongdoing and sin. It is He who willed that they should follow the right course, bestowing

on them His favours and bounty. All this He does in His wisdom and full knowledge of the truth. Again stating this truth implies that they should submit themselves to God's direction and planning, trusting that it is always for their own good. They should stop making suggestions and rushing hastily into what they consider to be good, before God has made His choice for them. God's Messenger takes them by the hand to gain all this goodness.

Man is hasty, but he is unaware of the likely consequences of his precipitate action. Man may also make suggestions concerning his own or other people's affairs, without knowing whether his suggestions will bring benefit or cause harm: "*Yet man prays for evil as eagerly as he prays for good. Truly man is ever hasty.*" (17: 11) If man would only submit himself to God, accepting what God chooses for him, knowing that God's choice is better, more compassionate and beneficial for him than what he may choose for himself, he would be much more comfortable. He would complete this short journey on this planet with ease and contentment. But this is also an aspect of God's grace which He grants to whomever He wills.

Fighting Between Muslim Believers

> *If two groups of believers fall to fighting, make peace between them. But then, if one of the two goes on acting wrongfully towards the other, fight against the one that acts wrongfully until it reverts to God's commandment; and if they revert, make peace between them with justice, and deal equitably with them. Indeed, God loves those who act equitably. All believers are but brothers. Hence, make peace between your two brothers, and remain God-fearing, so that you may receive [God's] mercy.* (Verses 9–10)

This is a practical rule to protect the community of believers from strife resulting from excesses and hard feelings. This rule is given immediately after the requirement to verify the reports given by evildoers, making sure that the believers do not rush into action that may be counterproductive. Whether this verse was revealed in consequence

of a particular case, as some reports suggest, or whether it was merely initiating a piece of legislation to outline what the Muslim community should do in such cases, it nonetheless provides a general and highly effective rule that stamps out strife and ensures solidarity within the Muslim community. It also establishes justice, rightness and fairness. All this is based on believers being God-fearing and their hope that He will bestow His grace on a community that deals with justice and works for reconciliation.

The Qur'ān either supposes or confronts the possibility of two groups of believers taking up arms against each other, yet it accepts that both are believers, even though one of them, or indeed both of them, may be in the wrong. It requires the Muslim community, other than the two fighting groups, to work for reconciliation between the two. But if one of them acts wrongfully, refusing to give up what it has no right to claim, or indeed if both act wrongfully, refusing reconciliation or refusing to abide by God's law over that which they dispute, then the believers must fight those who act wrongfully until they revert to God's commandment. The commandment at issue here is the ending of strife and conflict between believers and accepting God's judgement over anything contentious. Should those acting wrongfully revert to God's commandment, then the believers should establish reconciliation based on strict justice and equity, in obedience of God and seeking His pleasure: "*God loves those who act equitably.*" (Verse 9)

This judgement is followed by a touch that aims to bring out genuine feelings of brotherhood among believers. It is the bond that unites them after they have fallen out. They are also reminded of the need to always be God-fearing, suggesting that this is the only way to earn His grace. "*All believers are but brothers. Hence, make peace between your two brothers, and remain God-fearing, so that you may receive [God's] mercy.*" (Verse 10)

The correlation of this is that love, peace, cooperation and unity are the essential characteristics of a Muslim community. Conflict and fighting are exceptions that must be dealt with as soon as they occur in order to bring about reconciliation and peace. For this end, it is permissible for other Muslims to fight those of their brethren who act

wrongfully towards others; this so as to bring them back into the fold and restore the proper situation. This is certainly a tough and decisive measure.

This rule also provides that no wounded man in such battles may be finished off, and no captive may be killed. Those who lay down their arms and flee the battlefield cannot be pursued. Furthermore, the property of the group in the wrong may not be looted. The purpose of fighting them is not to finish them off, but rather to bring them back into line with the rest of the Muslim community.

In the right order of things, all Muslims of the world should have one leader. Once a pledge of loyalty is given to a leader to rule over the Muslim community as a whole, and another person claims such leadership for himself, this claimant should be killed. He and his supporters are considered rebels whom believers should fight alongside their leader. It was on this basis that Imām 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib fought those who rebelled in the battles of the Camel and Ṣiffīn. Many of the Prophet's distinguished Companions fought alongside him. However, a small number including Sa'd ibn Abī Waqqāṣ, Muḥammad ibn Maslamah, Usāmah ibn Zayd and 'Abdullāh ibn 'Umar chose not to engage in the battle, either because they could not determine which side was right or because, as al-Jaṣṣāṣ says, they felt that Imām 'Alī had clear superiority and hence their absence would not affect the result. The first probability is clearly the stronger, especially as this is borne out by some of their reported statements. Ibn 'Umar, for example, is reported to have expressed regret for not fighting alongside 'Alī.

This proper state of affairs, whereby the Muslims have only one leader, should be the norm in all situations, including those exceptional situations when two or more political rulers are in power in different and separate Muslim areas. It is the duty of Muslims to fight on the side of the single ruler against the group acting wrongfully, if they rebel against his authority, or if one group acts wrongfully towards another group without rebelling against the Muslim ruler *per se*. It is also the duty of Muslims to fight such rebels if they affiliate themselves to a political ruler in a situation where more than one Muslim ruler is in power. All Muslims must close ranks and stand against those acting wrongfully

until they revert to God's commandment. In this way, this text remains operational in all situations.

It is clear that this system, based on arbitration and fighting the group in the wrong until they revert to God's commandment, precedes all human attempts in this regard. Moreover, it is free of all the flaws and shortcomings inherent in defective human endeavours. Moreover, it incorporates qualities of purity, honesty and absolute justice. The arbitration that it calls for is based on operating God's orders, which are equitable, free of any prejudice and defect. Alas for mankind! They look on, but go away limping and stumbling when the clear, paved and straight way beckons to them.

No Ridicule, Defamation or Insult

> *Believers! No men shall deride other men: it may well be that those [whom they deride] are better than themselves. And no women [shall deride other] women: it may well be that those [whom they deride] are better than themselves. And neither shall you defame yourselves, nor insult one another by [opprobrious] epithets. Ill-seeming is a name connoting wickedness [to be used of one] after he has believed. Those who do not repent are indeed wrongdoers.* (Verse 11)

The human society Islam establishes in the light of Qur'ānic guidance operates a high standard of manners. Every individual in this society has his or her integrity, which may not be compromised. Indeed, it is part of the integrity of the whole community. To slander anyone is to slander oneself, because the whole community is a single entity and its integrity is one.

In this verse, the Qur'ān again addresses the believers by their most beloved description, "*Believers*". It forbids that one group should deride another, be they men deriding other men, or women deriding other women. For how can they know whether or not the ones they deride enjoy a better status with God?

The way this order is expressed suggests that the apparent values that men or women may consider important may not be those that

give people their real status. There are other values, which people may not know about. These are known to God who operates them in fairness. A rich man may deride a poor one. Similarly, those who are strong, enjoying good health, intelligence, children and support, may deride those who are less fortunate than themselves, such as those who are weak, handicapped, simple-minded, childless or orphans without support. A woman who sees herself as pretty, young, perfectly shaped, or rich may deride another for being ugly, old, misshaped, or poor. But none of these earthly values is of any importance as a criterion of high status. In God's sight, people are raised in rank on the basis of totally different values.

The Qur'ān, however, does not stop at implying this. It works on the sentiment of brotherhood in faith, reminding the believers that they descend from a single soul. Whoever defames anyone actually defames all. Hence, the Qur'ān says: *"Neither shall you defame yourselves."* (Verse 11) It should be mentioned that the word the Qur'ān uses for defaming, *talmizū*, has a particular resonance that imparts a feeling that also has a physical effect.

Part of derision and defamation is to call others names that they dislike, or feel to be meant as ridicule. It is the right of a believer not to be called by a name that he or she dislikes, or feels to suggest disrespect. Moreover, Islamic standards require a believer not to call a brother or a sister by such a name that gives them pain. The Prophet changed the names or nicknames of some of his Companions because he felt, with his refined sense and compassionate heart, that they could bring ridicule or pain to the people concerned.

Having outlined the true values in God's measure, and appealed to feelings of brotherhood and of belonging to one soul, the *sūrah* now reaches out to the believers' sense of faith, warning them that they will lose this noble quality if they indulge in derision and ridicule: *"Nor insult one another by [opprobrious] epithets. Ill-seeming is a name connoting wickedness [to be used of one] after he has believed."* (Verse 11) To indulge in this is akin to renouncing faith after one has believed. The *sūrah* goes even further than this by threatening to consider this an act of wrongdoing, something that is often expressed in the Qur'ān as being synonymous with associating partners with God. *"Those who do*

not repent are indeed wrongdoers." (Verse 11) Thus, the *sūrah* establishes the rules for refined manners in a noble community.

No Suspicion or Backbiting

> *Believers! Avoid suspicion as much as possible, for, some such suspicion is a sin. And do not spy on one another, nor backbite one another. Would any of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? Surely you would loathe it. And remain God-fearing. God is certainly the One who accepts repentance, and He is merciful.* (Verse 12)

This verse establishes yet another fence in this noble society, protecting the integrity and freedom of individuals, while at the same time teaching people how to cleanse their feelings and consciences. Following the pattern of the *sūrah*, it begins with the endearing address, "*Believers*". It follows this by issuing an order to avoid most suspicion, so that they do not leave themselves open to thoughts of doubt about others. It justifies this order by saying that some suspicion is sinful. Since the prohibition applies to most suspicion and the rule is that some suspicion is sinful, then the verse implies that all negative suspicion should be avoided, because no one knows which part of his or her doubts are sinful.

Thus the Qur'ān purges a Muslim's inner conscience so that it is not contaminated with evil suspicion and consequently incurs sin. It leaves it clean, free of doubt, entertaining only friendly and affectionate thoughts towards one's brethren. In this way it steers society away from suspicion so that the community enjoys reassurance and is not marred by worry and apprehension. Life in a community where ill thoughts have no place is both serene and comfortable.

Islam does not, however, stop at this point in educating people's hearts and souls. The verse we are looking at establishes a principle that applies to people's dealings with each other. It protects the rights of those who live in its pure society so that they are not punished or tried on the basis of suspicion. Indeed, suspicion does not even form a proper basis for interrogating people or investigating their affairs. The Prophet is quoted as saying: "If you have doubts, do not investigate." [Related by al-Ṭabarānī.] What this means is that people remain innocent, enjoying

all their rights, freedom and status until it is absolutely clear that they have committed some offence. It is not sufficient just to suspect them of having committed something so they are then pursued with the aim of establishing whether they are guilty or not.

This verse shows us the limit to which Islam goes in protecting people's freedom, integrity, rights and status. How does this compare with what even the best democratic countries boast of with regard to protecting human rights? This standard, which the Qur'ān sets for believers, is far superior indeed. Moreover, Islam achieves this in real life, after it establishes it in people's hearts and consciences.

The verse moves on to lay down another principle that provides social guarantees: "*And do not spy on one another.*" (Verse 12) Spying may be an action that follows immediately on entertaining suspicion. On the other hand, it may be an independent action that seeks to look at other people's faults and errors. The Qur'ān opposes spying because it is morally base. It aims to purge people's hearts from sinking into this vile pursuit in order to keep up its high moral standards.

Yet the order goes beyond this. It states an essential principle of the Islamic social system and its legislative measures. People are entitled to have their freedom and integrity respected. These should not be violated or encroached upon in any way.

In an Islamic society people enjoy a high standard of values. They enjoy security in their lives, homes and personal affairs. Nothing whatsoever justifies any violation of these. Indeed, the investigation of a crime does not provide, in the Islamic system, justification for spying on people. We take people by their appearances, and no one is entitled to delve into others' affairs. Indeed, people may not be taken to task except for what is evident of their offences. No one may suspect, anticipate or even know that others are secretly committing some violation and resort to spying on them so as to establish this as a fact or to catch them red-handed. All that may be done against such people is that they be put to trial when they actually commit a crime.

Some people said to 'Abdullāh ibn Mas'ūd, a learned scholar and a Companion of the Prophet: "We saw this man with his beard dripping wine." He said: "We have been forbidden to spy. If we see something

evident, we act on it." [Related by Abū Dāwūd.] Mujāhid says: "Do not spy on one another. Take people on the basis of what is apparent and do not look into what God has left concealed."

Imām Aḥmad quotes Dujayn, a clerk employed by 'Uqbah, saying: "I said to 'Uqbah that we have neighbours who drink and I want to call the police to take them to account." He said to me: "Do not do that. What you should do is to advise and warn them." Dujayn did this but his neighbours persisted in their prohibited ways. So he said to 'Uqbah again: "I have warned them, but they will not desist. I am calling the police." 'Uqbah said to him: "Do not do that. I heard the Prophet say: 'Whoever keeps to himself a fault of another believer is like one who rescues a girl buried alive.'" [Also related by Abū Dāwūd and al-Nasā'ī.]

Abū Dāwūd quotes Mu'āwiyah ibn Abī Sufyān as saying: "I heard the Prophet saying: 'If you pursue people's faults you corrupt them, or almost corrupt them'." Abū al-Dardā', a learned Companion of the Prophet, said: "This is a word Mu'āwiyah has heard from the Prophet, and God has enabled him to benefit by it."

Thus was the divine order implemented in practical life. It did not stop at being a form of practical education to purge hearts and consciences. It became like a fence protecting people's rights, freedom and sanctity, so that they could not be touched under any pretext. Far superior is this level to any achieved today, 1,400 years later, even by those societies which respect human rights and freedom most.

Next comes the order that forbids backbiting. This is given in such a way that it provides a graphic description of the disgusting nature of this action: *"Nor backbite one another. Would any of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? Surely you would loathe it."* (Verse 12) The order tells Muslims that they must not backbite. It then paints a scene that fills even the most insensitive of people with disgust, showing someone eating his dead brother's flesh. It immediately declares that they have, of course, a very strong and natural aversion to such behaviour. Hence, they also have a strong aversion against backbiting.

Following all these prohibitions against suspicion, spying and backbiting, the *sūrah* awakens believers' God-fearing instinct, inviting

anyone who has committed any of these unlawful acts to hasten and repent in the hope of God's mercy: *"And remain God-fearing. God is certainly the One who accepts repentance, and He is merciful."* (Verse 12)

Once again we say that this text is meant in practice to be like a high boundary protecting people's sanctity and integrity. It provides Muslims with a profound sense of morality. The Prophet follows the Qur'ān's example in making backbiting appear so disgusting. Abū Hurayrah reports that the Prophet was asked to define backbiting. He said: "To say about your brother something he dislikes." Someone asked: "Suppose that what I say is true of my brother." The Prophet answered: "If you say what is true, you are guilty of backbiting; but if it is untrue, you are guilty of wilful defamation." [Related by al-Tirmidhī who states that it is authentic.]

'Ā'ishah reports that she said to the Prophet: "It is enough that Ṣafiyyah [another wife of the Prophet] is so and so [referring to the fact that she is short]." The Prophet said to her: "You have said a word that would contaminate the entire volume of seawater." She added that she imitated someone to him, but he said: "I would rather not imitate anyone, even if I would get so and so for it." [Related by Abū Dāwūd.]

Anas ibn Mālik quotes the Prophet as saying: "When I was taken on my ascension to heaven, I passed by people with copper nails, scratching their faces and chests. I said: 'Gabriel, who are these?' He said: 'These are the ones who eat the flesh of others and detract from their honour.'" [Related by Abū Dāwūd.]

Mā'iz and the Ghāmidī woman confessed to the Prophet that they had committed adultery, insisting that the Prophet should administer the mandatory punishment to cleanse them. Hence he ordered that they be stoned. The Prophet subsequently heard one man say to another: "Have you seen this man whose offence God has concealed? Yet he insisted on being punished until he was stoned like a dog." The Prophet marched on with his Companions and soon passed by a dead donkey. He asked for the two men, and when they came forward, he said to them: "Get down and eat of this." Shocked, the two men said: "May God forgive you, Messenger of God! Is this something to be eaten?" He said: "What you said about your brother a short while ago is even more disgusting

than eating of this. By Him who holds my soul in His hand, he is now in heaven being bathed in its waters." [Related by Ibn Kathīr in his commentary on the Qur'ān.]

With such consistent treatment the Muslim community was purged and attained its high standard. It became like a dream that came true, a model to be followed and relished.

The Brotherhood of Mankind

Having addressed the believers in such a way as to elevate them to a superior level of refined manners and morality, the *sūrah* then addresses all mankind, of all races, colours and communities, reminding them that they all share one origin. One standard applies to them all: it is the same one that elevates the Muslim community to its superior level of unparalleled purity.

> *Mankind! We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another. Truly, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most genuinely God-fearing. God is all-knowing, all-aware.* (Verse 13)

All of you people, who present such different races and colours, communities and tribes, come from one origin. Hence, you should not divide into groups or fall out with each other and so waste your energy.

Mankind! You are being called by the One who created you out of a male and a female to inform you of the purpose of making you into nations and tribes. It is not so that you stir up conflict and enmity. It is rather for the purpose of getting to know one another and living peacefully together. Differences of language, colour, temperament, manners, talents and abilities do not lead to conflict and strife. In fact, they make for cooperation so that all tasks are fulfilled and all needs met. Colour, race, language, homeland and similar factors are of no importance in God's sight. There is only one criterion to determine people's worth: "*The noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is*

most genuinely God-fearing." (Verse 13) Noble indeed is the one who is noble in God's sight. He gives you your value on the basis of His perfect knowledge and His awareness of values and measures: "*God is all-knowing, all-aware.*" (Verse 13) Thus all dividing factors and values are discounted leaving only one measure and one value by which all mankind are tested.

Thus all reasons for conflict and quarrel on earth disappear, all considerations coveted by human beings lose their value. In their place, an important and distinctly clear reason for friendship and cooperation looms large: that is, God's Lordship of all and the fact that He has created all mankind from the same origin. A single banner is raised so that all compete to line up under it. That is the banner of fearing God alone. This is the banner raised by Islam in order to save humanity from the evil consequences of fanatic bonds of race, homeland, tribe, clan, family, etc. All these belong to the world of ignorance, or *Jāhiliyyah*, although they may take up different names, colours and fashions. In essence, though, they are ties of ignorance that have nothing to do with Islam.

Islam has fought ignorant fanaticism in all its forms and shapes so as to establish its world system under God's banner alone. In Islam, banners of nationality and race have neither place nor value. The Prophet said: "All of you descend from Adam, and Adam was created out of clay. Those people who seek pride in their ancestry should desist, or else God will bring them as low as beetles, or even lower." [Related by al-Bazzār on the authority of Hudhayfah.] Referring to the bonds valued in pre-Islamic days, the Prophet said: "Leave these altogether, because they stink." [Related by Muslim.]

This is the foundation of Islamic society: a human and global society. Humanity may stretch all its imagination and exert its best efforts to achieve even one aspect of it, but it fails because it does not follow the clear and straight road leading to it, as defined by God, and because it does not raise God's banner which unites us all.

The Meaning of True Faith

As the *sūrah* draws to its end, it fittingly explains the truth of faith in reply to those Bedouins who claimed to be believers when they did not

even understand the nature of faith. This also serves as a reply to those who tried to press their acceptance of Islam as a favour they thought they did for the Prophet. In essence, they do not appreciate that it is only through God's favour that people believe.

> *The Bedouin say: 'We have attained to faith.' Say [to them]: 'Believers you are not. Rather say, 'We have submitted ourselves', for true faith has not entered your hearts. But if you truly pay heed to God and His Messenger, He will let nothing of your deeds go to waste. God is indeed much-forgiving, merciful.' True believers are only those who have believed in God and His Messenger, and never then entertained any doubt, and who strive hard in God's cause with their possessions and their lives. Those are the ones who are true to their word. Say: 'Do you, perchance, want to inform God of your faith, when God knows all that is in the heavens and earth? Indeed, God has full knowledge of everything.' They think that they have bestowed a favour upon you by having embraced Islam. Say: 'Do not count your embrace of Islam a favour to me. It is indeed God who bestows a favour upon you by showing you the way to faith, if you are men of truth.' God certainly knows the hidden reality of the heavens and the earth; and God sees all that you do.* (Verses 14–18)

The first of these verses is said to have been revealed in relation to the Bedouins of the Asad tribe who, as soon as they accepted Islam, boasted saying, 'We have attained to faith.' They even counted this as a favour they performed for the Prophet. They said to him: "Messenger of God! We have become Muslims. Other Arabs have fought you, but we have not." God wanted to show them the truth of what was in their hearts when they said this, stating that they only embraced Islam in submission while the truth of faith had not touched their hearts or souls. "*Say [to them]: 'Believers you are not. Rather say, "We have submitted ourselves", for true faith has not entered your hearts.'*" (Verse 14)

Nevertheless, God's grace has dictated that they will be rewarded for every good action they do, letting nothing go to waste. Even the outward manifestation of Islam, which has not yet penetrated into people's hearts to become genuine faith, is sufficient to make their

good deeds count and be recorded. Thus, their deeds are not wasted like those of unbelievers. No part of their reward is wasted as long as they continue to obey: "*If you truly pay heed to God and His Messenger, He will let nothing of your deeds go to waste.*" (Verse 14) This is because God is quick to grant forgiveness and bestow His mercy. He accepts from His servant the first step and rewards him for submission and obedience while waiting until faith settles in his heart: "*God is indeed much-forgiving, merciful.*" (Verse 14)

God then explains to them the nature of genuine belief: "*True believers are only those who have believed in God and His Messenger, and never then entertained any doubt, and who strive hard in God's cause with their possessions and their lives. Those are the ones who are true to their word.*" (Verse 15)

True faith, then, means that deep in one's heart one believes in God and His Messenger, admitting no doubt or faltering. It is a solid, unshaken belief that allows no hesitation or oscillation. Moreover, it is a belief that motivates people to strive hard for God's cause, sacrificing their possessions and their lives. When a person's heart experiences the beauty of this belief and has the reassurance bred by such experience, he or she will take the necessary action to establish its meaning beyond their own hearts and souls, i.e. in real human life. They want to bring about union and harmony between the truth of faith they feel in their hearts and what takes place in the world around them. They simply will not tolerate any discordance between faith and practice, because such discordance jars at every moment. Hence, striving for God's cause, laying down one's life and possessions in order to achieve its goals. It is, then, a self-motivated action that aims to transfer the bright and enlightened image one sees in one's heart into practical human life. The rift between a believer and the worldly life around him based on *jāhiliyyah* is an inherent rift caused by the fact that a believer cannot lead a life of double standards, one based on faith and the other on people's practices. Similarly, he cannot give up his sound and beautiful concept of faith in favour of a practical model that is deficient, ugly and deviant. Hence, a confrontation with ignorance, or *jāhiliyyah*, is inevitable, until it gives up and adopts the light of faith.

"*Those are the ones who are true to their word.*" (Verse 15) They are true in their faith, and true to their claims that they are believers. Unless those feelings in a believer's heart are a reality, bringing tangible effects into practical life, faith remains theoretical.

We need to reflect a little on the precautionary note in this verse: "*True believers are only those who have believed in God and His Messenger, and never then entertained any doubt.*" (Verse 15) This point about never entertaining doubt is not a merely additional clause. It points to a real experience and provides treatment for a condition that may arise even after one has truly believed. The way this is phrased is significant, *'and never then entertained any doubt.'* A similar precautionary note is seen in the verse that says: "*Those who say, 'Our Lord is God,' and then steadfastly pursue the right way...*" (41: 30) The need to entertain no doubt and the need for the steadfast pursuit of the right way points to what a believing soul may experience under severe pressure and testing hardship. Doubt or hesitation may creep in. A believer may have to deal with severely testing times and calamities that shake the very foundation of his world. Hence, the one who remains steadfast, entertaining no doubt and pursuing the right way in all situations is the one who deserves high rank with God.

Putting the fact in this way alerts believers' hearts to the slips and risks in their way. This enables them to take precautions, prepare themselves to withstand any hardship that comes their way, and maintain their course even in the face of the most adverse circumstances.

The *sūrah* continues its address to the Bedouins, telling them that God knows what is in their hearts. Furthermore, He can tell them what they harbour in their minds, without waiting for them to tell Him:

> *Say: Do you, perchance, want to inform God of your faith, when God knows all that is in the heavens and earth? Indeed, God has full knowledge of everything.* (Verse 16)

Man may profess to have knowledge, yet he neither knows nor understands himself or his feelings. The human mind does not know how it works because it cannot monitor its own working. When the mind monitors itself, it stops working naturally, and thus it has nothing

to monitor. When it performs its natural work, the human mind cannot at the same time do any monitoring. Hence it is unable to know its own nature or how it functions. Yet it is his mind that man boasts of, giving it a superior status.

"*God knows all that is in the heavens and earth.*" (Verse 16) His is a perfect knowledge that comprehends the very nature of everything in the heavens and the earth. His knowledge is not based on appearances and effects, but on a perfect knowledge of the nature of things that is independent of time and free of any limitation. Moreover, "*God has full knowledge of everything.*" (Verse 16) This encompasses the entire universe and everything in it.

God's Real Favour

Having explained the true nature of faith, the *sūrah* then addresses the Prophet, referring to those Bedouins and how they asserted that they had done the Prophet a favour by accepting Islam. This very action is clear evidence that the nature of faith had not yet penetrated their hearts. They had not yet experienced the beauty of faith:

> *They think that they have bestowed a favour upon you by having embraced Islam. Say: 'Do not count your embrace of Islam a favour to me. It is indeed God who bestows a favour upon you by showing you the way to faith, if you are men of truth.'* (Verse 17)

This answer clearly tells them that they cannot hold this as a favour and that if they truly believe, then they owe a great favour to God who has guided them to it.

We should reflect on this answer, because it highlights a very important fact, one that most people, including some believers, overlook. Faith is the supreme favour God grants to anyone of His servants on earth. It is indeed greater than man's very existence, which is a favour God grants to man in the first place. It is also superior to what relates to existence, such as the provision of sustenance, health and adornment. It is the favour that gives human existence a distinctive entity, and assigns to man a great role in the system of the universe.

The first thing that faith gives man, when it settles firmly in his heart, is a broader vision of the universe, how it relates to him, and his role in it; an accurate criterion with which to know the essence of values, people and events; genuine reassurance as he embarks on his journey through this planet up to the time when he meets his Lord; a friendly relation with everything around him in the universe; a warm, interactive relationship with God who has created him and the universe; a feeling that he is honoured and that he is fulfilling an important role to please God and to bring goodness to this universe and to all who live in it. A manifestation of this broad vision is that man breaks out of the narrow confinements of his own small and weak entity to function on the stage of the universe, with all its inherent forces and secrets.

In relation to his own kind, man is an individual of a humanity that goes back to a single origin, which, in the first place, acquired its distinction from God's spirit which was breathed into this creature made of clay so as to bring him into contact with the divine light. This is a light that is not confined to a heaven or earth, has neither a beginning nor an end, and knows no limit of time or place. It is this free factor that has made man what he is. It is enough that this concept is properly appreciated by man in order that he begins to have a better appreciation of his position of honour and to feel this light, even as he walks on earth. His heart will then certainly have wings of light to carry him to the original source of light that gives his life its distinctive character.

In as far as his affiliation is concerned, he, as an individual, belongs to the single community of believers that stretches over the centuries, forming a noble procession led by Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muḥammad and their brethren prophets [peace be upon them all]. When this fact is fully appreciated by anyone, they feel themselves to be a branch of a great tree with deep roots and widely stretching boughs. This feeling gives believers a different taste of life, one that imparts to it a sense of nobility.

Man's vision thus becomes even broader so as to transcend his own entity, his community and the human race as a whole. He begins to see this whole existence as it originates with God, from the breathing of whose spirit he has become a man. His faith then tells him that this universe is a living entity, composed of countless other living entities.

Everything in this universe, including the universe itself, has a spirit. Like his own spirit, all these spirits turn to their Creator with prayer, glorification, praise, submission and obedience. Thus, in this universe, a believer feels himself to be an inseparable part of a complete whole. He belongs to his Creator, his soul turns to Him and he eventually returns to Him. Thus, he feels himself to be bigger and greater than his own limited world. He is bigger in relation to his vision of this great universe. He thus feels befriended by all the spirits around him, and beyond that befriended by God who looks after him. He then feels himself able to have a bond with this universe and to grow in stature in relation to it. He can do many things, initiate great events, influence and be influenced by all around him, and can derive strength from the Supreme Power that initiated him as well as all forces and powers in the universe. That is the Power that never weakens, shrinks or disappears.

All For a Definite Purpose

From this broad vision a believer derives new standards and criteria to evaluate things, events, people, concerns, values and goals. He recognizes his true role in the universe and his task in this life. He looks at himself as a manifestation of God's will who sets him on his course to bring about whatever end He has determined. Thus, a believer continues his life on earth with clear vision, steady step and easy conscience. This knowledge gives believers what they feel of serenity, reassurance and delight with what takes place around them, including what happens to them. They have true answers to their questions: Where have they come from, and why? Where are they going, and what will they find there? They know that they are in this life for a particular purpose, and that whatever happens to them serves to bring about that purpose. They know that this life is the testing ground for the life to come; that they will be requited for every action they do, major or minor, and that they have not been created in vain, will not be abandoned or left to travel alone.

When we have such knowledge, all worries, doubts and feelings of insecurity disappear. After all, they are due to ignorance, on the part of those expressing or experiencing them, of our origin and destiny,

unawareness of what lies ahead in our way, and lack of trust in the purpose behind our existence and life journey. We will have no more feelings like those described by 'Umar al-Khayyām who says:

> Into this universe and *why* not knowing
> Nor, *whence*, like willy-nilly flowing;
> And out of it as wind along the waste,
> I know not *wither*, willy-nilly blowing.

Believers know that they wear the garment of life by God's will, and that God runs the universe, conducting all its affairs, with wisdom and knowledge. They also know that the hand that made them wear this garment is much wiser and more compassionate than they. Hence, there is no need to consult others, because they could not give a sound opinion like that which belongs to the Owner of that hand who knows all and sees all. They know that they are given this garment of life to wear in order to fulfil a certain role in the universe, being influenced by, and leaving their own influence on all things in it. This role is harmonious with all the other roles assigned to all other creatures from the beginning of life to its end.

Thus believers know why they have come to this life and to where they are heading. They do not experience any loss as they try to understand. They complete their journey, fulfilling their role, with trust and reassurance. They may even attain a higher degree of faith that enables them to carry on with their journey and the fulfilment of their role, with delight and happiness, feeling the great bounty God has given them. This is the bounty of life, or its garment, given to them by God, the most generous, the compassionate. This is the bounty of their role, which they fulfil regardless of what they may encounter of hardship, until they return to their Lord.

Similarly, feelings like those I myself experienced during a period of loss and worry also disappear. That was before I began to live 'In the Shade of the Qur'ān', when God took me by the hand and placed me under His blessed care. These were feelings that my tired soul imparted at the time to the entire universe and I expressed those feelings in poetry saying:

The universe stood there, not knowing which way it should go;
And why, and where, if at all, it should go;
It is all a waste, a child's play, and an aimless effort;
And it ends up in a masked destiny that gives no satisfaction.

Today, however, I know that, by God's grace, there is no aimless effort or wasted action, because every action and every effort will have its fruits and gain its reward. That same destiny will also give great satisfaction, because it is left to the One who is most just, most merciful. I also feel today, by the grace of God, that the universe never stands in that miserable position, because the soul of the universe believes in its Lord, turns to Him in glorification and praise. The universe operates in accordance with the law God has set for it, obedient, contented and submissive.

This is a great gain in the realm of feeling and thought, in the physical world of body and mind, as well as in the practical world of action and mutual influence.

Besides, faith is a great motivating force. When it is settled in a person's heart, it begins to work, fulfil itself and bring about perfect harmony between its inner image and its appearance. It takes control over all human motivations and harnesses them along the way. This is the secret of the strength of faith in the human soul and the power one gains through faith. It is the secret underlying the miracles faith has achieved in this world, and continues to achieve every day: miracles that change the whole appearance of life from one day to another. It is faith that motivates both the individual and the community to sacrifice their lives on earth in order to gain success in the greater and everlasting life to come. Furthermore, it is faith that gives an ordinary individual, with little or no support, the means to stand up to oppressive forces and to both temptation and persecution. All these forces are easily vanquished when they face the motivating power of faith in the heart of a single believer. It is not the individual that achieves success over all these forces; it is the great power that derives from the spirit of faith which is akin to a powerfully flowing and inexhaustible spring.

The miracles achieved through faith in the life of the individual and the community do not rely on mysterious myth, vision or superstition.

Instead, they are the result of well-defined causes and well-established rules. Faith is holistic: it is the force that establishes the relationship between man and the apparent and subtle forces in the universe, giving his soul trust and reassurance. It also gives the believer the ability to confront worldly powers and situations with the strength of one who is certain of victory, trusting to God's help. It makes it clear to the individual believer his relations with other people, events and situations, outlining for him his direction, way and goal. It harnesses all his strengths and potentials to direct them all to a clear goal, so that he moves towards it with force, confidence and reassurance.

What makes faith doubly powerful is that it operates along the same line that the universe follows in its deep and surface parts. Indeed, all the powers that work in the universe follow a direction set by faith. Thus, as they move along their way, believers meet these powers in their great march to give the truth its victory over falsehood, no matter how powerful the latter may appear.

God certainly tells the truth as He says: "*They think that they have bestowed a favour upon you by having embraced Islam. Say: Do not count your embrace of Islam a favour to me. It is indeed God who bestows a favour upon you by showing you the way to faith, if you are men of truth.*" (Verse 17) Indeed faith is the supreme favour that can only be granted by God the Bounteous to whomever He knows to be deserving of it.

God certainly tells the truth! Does anyone who has had the privilege of knowing all these facts, meanings and feelings, experienced them to the full and lived through them in this present world ever feel that he has missed out on anything? Conversely, what does the one who misses out on all these gain, even though he may live in comfort and luxury? He may eat as he pleases, but animals also eat, although animals are better off because by their nature they submit to their Lord and turn towards their Creator.

> *God certainly knows the hidden reality of the heavens and the earth; and God sees all that you do.* (Verse 18)

The One who knows all that is hidden in the heavens and the earth also knows what is hidden in people's innermost souls. He knows people's

feelings and sees what they do. He does not derive His knowledge from the words they say, but from the feelings they harbour in their hearts and the actions that confirm their feelings.

Thus we come to the conclusion of this *sūrah*, comprising 18 verses, but delineating the features of a noble and pure world, outlining great truths and establishing them in people's inner consciences.

SŪRAH 50

Qāf

Prologue

The Prophet used to read this *sūrah* when he delivered a sermon on ʿĪd occasions and before Friday prayers, making it the theme and the content of his speech for large audiences. It is certainly a momentous *sūrah*, outlining fundamental facts, using a strong rhythm, powerful expressions, clearly-delineated images, highlighted connotations and emphatic verse endings. It addresses our hearts and minds from all angles putting before us the truth that we are always under God's watchful eye, from birth to death, and then to the time of resurrection, gathering and reckoning. This is an ever-present watch of man at all times, losing nothing and overlooking nothing. Every breath, fleeting thought and feeling is known; every uttered word is recorded; every move is monitored. This complete watch accounts for thoughts and actions alike; nothing escapes it, and nothing is hidden from it. It monitors secret whispers in the same way as it records what is done in broad daylight.

All these are well-known facts. However, the *sūrah* outlines them here in a way that shows them to be totally new, with surprising effects that combine apprehension with wonder. It shakes us powerfully alerting us to a momentous event, about which we have thus far been oblivious. It uses images of life, death, decay and subsequent resurrection. It touches

on our expectations of life after death. It refers to a host of universal truths in the heavens and earth, water and plants, fruits ripening individually and in clusters. It all "*serves as a lesson and a reminder to everyone who wishes to turn to God.*" (Verse 8)

It is very difficult to give a summary of this *sūrah*, as also list its main points, or outline the ideas discussed and the images portrayed in any manner of speech other than their original Qur'ānic style and expression. Therefore, we will proceed straightaway to our discussion of the *sūrah*, praying for God's help.

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسۡمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحۡمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

Qāf. By the glorious Qur'ān. (1)

قٓۚ وَٱلۡقُرۡءَانِ ٱلۡمَجِيدِ ١

But the unbelievers deem it strange that a warner from among themselves should have come to them and they say: 'This is indeed most strange! (2)

بَلۡ عَجِبُوٓاْ أَن جَآءَهُم مُّنذِرٞ مِّنۡهُمۡ فَقَالَ ٱلۡكَٰفِرُونَ هَٰذَا شَيۡءٌ عَجِيبٌ ٢

When we have died and become dust…? Such a return to life is too far-fetched.' (3)

أَءِذَا مِتۡنَا وَكُنَّا تُرَابٗاۖ ذَٰلِكَ رَجۡعُۢ بَعِيدٞ ٣

We know very well what the earth takes away from them. We have an unfailing, comprehensive record. (4)

قَدۡ عَلِمۡنَا مَا تَنقُصُ ٱلۡأَرۡضُ مِنۡهُمۡۖ وَعِندَنَا كِتَٰبٌ حَفِيظُۢ ٤

Yet they deny the truth when it comes to them; and so they are in a state of confusion. (5)

بَلۡ كَذَّبُواْ بِٱلۡحَقِّ لَمَّا جَآءَهُمۡ فَهُمۡ فِيٓ أَمۡرٖ مَّرِيجٍ ٥

Do they not look at the sky above them: how We have built it and adorned it, leaving no flaws in it. (6)

أَفَلَمۡ يَنظُرُوٓاْ إِلَى ٱلسَّمَآءِ فَوۡقَهُمۡ كَيۡفَ بَنَيۡنَٰهَا وَزَيَّنَّٰهَا وَمَا لَهَا مِن فُرُوجٖ ٦

We spread out the earth and set upon it firm mountains, and caused every kind of delectable plants to grow on it, (7)

وَٱلْأَرْضَ مَدَدْنَٰهَا وَأَلْقَيْنَا فِيهَا رَوَٰسِىَ
وَأَنۢبَتْنَا فِيهَا مِن كُلِّ زَوْجٍۭ بَهِيجٍ ﴿٧﴾

so that it serves as a lesson and a reminder to everyone who wishes to turn to God. (8)

تَبْصِرَةً وَذِكْرَىٰ لِكُلِّ عَبْدٍ مُّنِيبٍ ﴿٨﴾

We send down from the skies water rich in blessings, and We produce with it gardens and fields of grain, (9)

وَنَزَّلْنَا مِنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ مَآءً مُّبَٰرَكًا فَأَنۢبَتْنَا
بِهِۦ جَنَّٰتٍ وَحَبَّ ٱلْحَصِيدِ ﴿٩﴾

and tall palm trees laden with clusters of dates, (10)

وَٱلنَّخْلَ بَاسِقَٰتٍ لَّهَا طَلْعٌ نَّضِيدٌ ﴿١٠﴾

providing sustenance suitable for people. Thus We bring dead land to life. So will people come forth from the dead. (11)

رِّزْقًا لِّلْعِبَادِ ۖ وَأَحْيَيْنَا بِهِۦ بَلْدَةً مَّيْتًا ۚ
كَذَٰلِكَ ٱلْخُرُوجُ ﴿١١﴾

Long before these unbelievers Noah's people also disbelieved, as did the people of al-Rass, Thamūd, (12)

كَذَّبَتْ قَبْلَهُمْ قَوْمُ نُوحٍ وَأَصْحَٰبُ
ٱلرَّسِّ وَثَمُودُ ﴿١٢﴾

'Ād, Pharaoh, Lot's brethren, (13)

وَعَادٌ وَفِرْعَوْنُ وَإِخْوَٰنُ لُوطٍ ﴿١٣﴾

the dwellers of the wooded dales and the people of Tubba': they all disbelieved God's messengers, and therefore My warnings came true. (14)

وَأَصْحَٰبُ ٱلْأَيْكَةِ وَقَوْمُ تُبَّعٍ ۚ كُلٌّ كَذَّبَ
ٱلرُّسُلَ فَحَقَّ وَعِيدِ ﴿١٤﴾

Were We worn out by the first creation? Yet they are still in doubt about a second creation. (15)

أَفَعَيِينَا بِٱلْخَلْقِ ٱلْأَوَّلِ ۚ بَلْ هُمْ فِى لَبْسٍ مِّنْ خَلْقٍ جَدِيدٍ ﴿١٥﴾

It is We who have created man, and We know what his soul whispers to him. We are closer to him than his jugular vein; (16)

وَلَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا ٱلْإِنسَٰنَ وَنَعْلَمُ مَا تُوَسْوِسُ بِهِۦ نَفْسُهُۥ ۖ وَنَحْنُ أَقْرَبُ إِلَيْهِ مِنْ حَبْلِ ٱلْوَرِيدِ ﴿١٦﴾

with two receptors set to record, one on his right and one on his left, (17)

إِذْ يَتَلَقَّى ٱلْمُتَلَقِّيَانِ عَنِ ٱلْيَمِينِ وَعَنِ ٱلشِّمَالِ قَعِيدٌ ﴿١٧﴾

every word he utters [is noted down by] an ever-present watcher. (18)

مَّا يَلْفِظُ مِن قَوْلٍ إِلَّا لَدَيْهِ رَقِيبٌ عَتِيدٌ ﴿١٨﴾

The stupor of death brings with it the full truth: 'This is what you tried to escape.' (19)

وَجَآءَتْ سَكْرَةُ ٱلْمَوْتِ بِٱلْحَقِّ ۖ ذَٰلِكَ مَا كُنتَ مِنْهُ تَحِيدُ ﴿١٩﴾

The trumpet will be blown: 'This is the day [you were] warned of.' (20)

وَنُفِخَ فِى ٱلصُّورِ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ يَوْمُ ٱلْوَعِيدِ ﴿٢٠﴾

Every soul will come attended by one who will drive it on and another to bear witness. (21)

وَجَآءَتْ كُلُّ نَفْسٍ مَّعَهَا سَآئِقٌ وَشَهِيدٌ ﴿٢١﴾

'Of this you have been unmindful, but We have lifted your veil and sharp is your sight today.' (22)

لَّقَدْ كُنتَ فِى غَفْلَةٍ مِّنْ هَٰذَا فَكَشَفْنَا عَنكَ غِطَآءَكَ فَبَصَرُكَ ٱلْيَوْمَ حَدِيدٌ ﴿٢٢﴾

And his companion will say: 'Here is what I have recorded.' (23)

وَقَالَ قَرِينُهُۥ هَٰذَا مَا لَدَيَّ عَتِيدٌ ﴿٢٣﴾

'Cast into hell every hardened unbeliever, (24)

أَلْقِيَا فِى جَهَنَّمَ كُلَّ كَفَّارٍ عَنِيدٍ ﴿٢٤﴾

everyone who hindered good, was a sinful aggressor, fomenter of doubt, (25)

مَّنَّاعٍ لِّلْخَيْرِ مُعْتَدٍ مُّرِيبٍ ﴿٢٥﴾

who set up another deity alongside God. Cast him into severe suffering.' (26)

ٱلَّذِى جَعَلَ مَعَ ٱللَّهِ إِلَٰهًا ءَاخَرَ فَأَلْقِيَاهُ فِى
ٱلْعَذَابِ ٱلشَّدِيدِ ﴿٢٦﴾

His companion will say: 'Our Lord! I did not make him transgress. He had already gone far astray.' (27)

قَالَ قَرِينُهُۥ رَبَّنَا مَآ أَطْغَيْتُهُۥ وَلَٰكِن كَانَ
فِى ضَلَٰلٍۭ بَعِيدٍ ﴿٢٧﴾

God will say: 'Do not argue in My presence, for I had forewarned you. (28)

قَالَ لَا تَخْتَصِمُوا۟ لَدَىَّ وَقَدْ قَدَّمْتُ
إِلَيْكُم بِٱلْوَعِيدِ ﴿٢٨﴾

My word will not be altered; but never do I do the least wrong to My creatures.' (29)

مَا يُبَدَّلُ ٱلْقَوْلُ لَدَىَّ وَمَآ أَنَا۠ بِظَلَّٰمٍ لِّلْعَبِيدِ ﴿٢٩﴾

On that day We will ask hell, 'Are you full?' and it will reply, 'Are there no more?' (30)

يَوْمَ نَقُولُ لِجَهَنَّمَ هَلِ ٱمْتَلَأْتِ وَتَقُولُ
هَلْ مِن مَّزِيدٍ ﴿٣٠﴾

And paradise will be brought close to the righteous and will no longer be distant: (31)

وَأُزْلِفَتِ ٱلْجَنَّةُ لِلْمُتَّقِينَ غَيْرَ بَعِيدٍ ﴿٣١﴾

‘This is what you have been promised; this is for everyone who used to turn to God and to keep Him in mind, (32)

هَٰذَا مَا تُوعَدُونَ لِكُلِّ أَوَّابٍ حَفِيظٍ ﴿٣٢﴾

who used to stand in awe of the Lord of Grace although He is beyond the reach of human perception, and who comes before Him with a heart full of devotion. (33)

مَّنْ خَشِيَ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنَ بِٱلْغَيْبِ وَجَآءَ بِقَلْبٍ
مُّنِيبٍ ﴿٣٣﴾

Enter paradise in peace; this is the day when everlasting life begins.’ (34)

ٱدْخُلُوهَا بِسَلَٰمٍ ذَٰلِكَ يَوْمُ ٱلْخُلُودِ ﴿٣٤﴾

There they shall have all that they desire, and We have even more for them. (35)

لَهُم مَّا يَشَآءُونَ فِيهَا وَلَدَيْنَا مَزِيدٌ ﴿٣٥﴾

How many a generation, far greater in power, have We destroyed before these [unbelievers]? They wandered through the lands seeking a place of refuge. (36)

وَكَمْ أَهْلَكْنَا قَبْلَهُم مِّن قَرْنٍ هُمْ
أَشَدُّ مِنْهُم بَطْشًا فَنَقَّبُوا۟ فِى ٱلْبِلَٰدِ هَلْ
مِن مَّحِيصٍ ﴿٣٦﴾

In this there is a reminder for everyone who has an alert heart, or one who attentively listens and sees. (37)

إِنَّ فِى ذَٰلِكَ لَذِكْرَىٰ لِمَن كَانَ لَهُۥ قَلْبٌ
أَوْ أَلْقَى ٱلسَّمْعَ وَهُوَ شَهِيدٌ ﴿٣٧﴾

We have indeed created the heavens and the earth and all that is in between in six days. No weariness could ever touch Us. (38)

وَلَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضَ
وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا فِى سِتَّةِ أَيَّامٍ وَمَا مَسَّنَا
مِن لُّغُوبٍ ﴿٣٨﴾

Bear, then, with patience whatever they may say, and extol your Lord's limitless glory before the rising of the sun and before its setting; (39)

فَٱصۡبِرۡ عَلَىٰ مَا يَقُولُونَ وَسَبِّحۡ بِحَمۡدِ رَبِّكَ قَبۡلَ طُلُوعِ ٱلشَّمۡسِ وَقَبۡلَ ٱلۡغُرُوبِ ﴿٣٩﴾

and in the night, too, extol His glory, and at the end of every prayer. (40)

وَمِنَ ٱلَّيۡلِ فَسَبِّحۡهُ وَأَدۡبَٰرَ ٱلسُّجُودِ ﴿٤٠﴾

And listen out for the day when the caller will call from a nearby place, (41)

وَٱسۡتَمِعۡ يَوۡمَ يُنَادِ ٱلۡمُنَادِ مِن مَّكَانٖ قَرِيبٖ ﴿٤١﴾

the day when they will in truth hear the mighty blast; that is the day when they will come out [of their graves]. (42)

يَوۡمَ يَسۡمَعُونَ ٱلصَّيۡحَةَ بِٱلۡحَقِّۚ ذَٰلِكَ يَوۡمُ ٱلۡخُرُوجِ ﴿٤٢﴾

It is We who grant life and deal death; and to Us all shall return. (43)

إِنَّا نَحۡنُ نُحۡيِۦ وَنُمِيتُ وَإِلَيۡنَا ٱلۡمَصِيرُ ﴿٤٣﴾

On the day when the earth will be rent asunder all around them, letting them rush out. That gathering will be easy for Us. (44)

يَوۡمَ تَشَقَّقُ ٱلۡأَرۡضُ عَنۡهُمۡ سِرَاعٗاۚ ذَٰلِكَ حَشۡرٌ عَلَيۡنَا يَسِيرٞ ﴿٤٤﴾

We are fully aware of what they say. You are not one to use coercion with them. Therefore, remind, with the Qur'ān, those who fear My warning. (45)

نَّحۡنُ أَعۡلَمُ بِمَا يَقُولُونَۖ وَمَآ أَنتَ عَلَيۡهِم بِجَبَّارٖۖ فَذَكِّرۡ بِٱلۡقُرۡءَانِ مَن يَخَافُ وَعِيدِ ﴿٤٥﴾

Truth and Denial

In its initial section, comprising the first 15 verses, the *sūrah* speaks about resurrection and its denial by the unbelievers who wonder that it should even be mentioned, let alone asserted. The Qur'ān, however, not only addresses their denial of the truth of resurrection, it also aims to put their deviant minds back on the right track. It tries first to awaken their hearts, alerting them to contemplation of the great truths that are clearly manifest in the universe. It does not engage them in any intellectual argument about resurrection; instead, it tries to bring life into their hearts and minds so that they can reflect. It puts before them the truth that is clearly evident in everything around them so that they will respond. This method is especially effective and is one that should be carefully studied by advocates of the divine message.

The *sūrah* begins with an oath by the letter *Qāf* and by the glorious Qur'ān, which is composed of letters like *Qāf*. In fact, this is the first letter of the word 'Qur'ān'. The *sūrah* does not mention the subject matter of the oath, leaving it as a way to open the door to whatever the *sūrah* wants to say. Thus, the oath serves to alert us to the fact that what comes afterwards is momentous. This is indeed what is intended, as the *sūrah* immediately moves away from the oath using the conjunction *bal*, which has no English equivalent.[1] It now begins to discuss their amazement at what God's Messenger and the Qur'ān say about the dead being brought back to life: "*But the unbelievers deem it strange that a warner from among themselves should have come to them and they say: 'This is indeed most strange! When we have died and become dust...? Such a return to life is too far-fetched.'*" (Verses 2–3)

They think it strange that someone from among themselves should warn them when this is indeed the very thing that human nature easily accepts. It is most natural that God should have chosen one of them to deliver His message for he was someone who could readily share their feelings, speak their language, take part in their activities, be amongst them through their lives, appreciate their motives as also recognize their

1. Some translators use the word nay to render the Arabic conjunction *bal*, but this is rather unsatisfactory in most cases as nay has connotations of negation. Here we have used the term 'but', though admittedly this too is inadequate. – Editor's note.

abilities and limits. Such a person is the best one to warn them against what may happen should they persist in their erring ways, to teach them how to change course, and to outline the duties that they have to fulfil. He would be the first to discharge these duties.

They felt it strange, however, to have such a message delivered in the first place, and were particularly amazed that this Messenger should speak to them about their being raised from the dead. Resurrection is central to the Islamic faith; indeed, it is the foundation on which all requirements of Islam are based. Every Muslim is required to support the truth against falsehood and uphold goodness against evil. A Muslim needs to make everything he does in life an act of worship, by ensuring that whatever he does aims to win God's acceptance and serve His cause. All action must be rewarded, and reward might not be forthcoming during our life's journey on earth. It is thus deferred until the final reckoning is done. This means that another world is needed. Hence resurrection, so as to face the reckoning in the next world. Should this fundamental principle of a second life disappear from a person's mindset, that person cannot form a clear concept of Islam and so cannot follow it.

Those people in Makkah, however, did not look at the question in this light at all. They were too naïve to understand the true nature of life and death, or to visualize God's power. Hence they said: "*When we have died and become dust...? Such a return to life is too far-fetched.*" (Verse 3) Thus, to them, it was a question of improbability of life after death when people's bodies have decomposed and turned to dust. Yet, since life takes place in the first place, why is it improbable for it to occur again. Moreover, this miracle of life occurs before their very eyes at every moment. It is there around them throughout the universe. It is to this that the Qur'ān draws their attention in this *sūrah*.

Before we continue with what the *sūrah* says about the universe and the images of life it portrays we need to reflect a little on the fact that people perish. This is pointed out by the unbelievers as they say: "*When we have died and become dust...?*" So people die and perish. Whoever reads what those unbelievers say will look at himself and people living in his vicinity and imagine how death occurs. In fact, he will begin to feel how he will turn to nothing when he is still alive, walking on earth.

Nothing shakes a person's heart like death, and nothing fills him with dread like perishing. The *sūrah*'s comment strengthens this effect as it describes the earth eating them little by little: "*We know very well what the earth takes away from them. We have an unfailing, comprehensive record.*" (Verse 4) The phraseology of this comment shows the earth as a living thing that swallows, little by little, their buried bodies in a steady progressive action asserting that God knows what the earth swallows and that it is all recorded. Nothing is lost even though they may die and perish. As for putting life back into this dust that remains from their bodies, this is merely a repeat of what had happened before and what continues to happen in endless processes of bringing forth life anew.

We see how the *sūrah* makes successive touches to soften hearts, readying them to receive what follows before addressing the main issue.

The *sūrah* then describes the state of mind that gives rise to their flimsy objections. They have denied the truth, which made the earth under their feet move. In this way they are completely unstable: "*Yet they deny the truth when it comes to them; and so they are in a state of confusion.*" (Verse 5) This is a telling image. The truth is the solid point where a believer stands, giving him a firm step as he walks on solid ground. Everything around him that is contrary to the truth is unstable, confused and lacking substance. Whoever steps outside the truth is bound to slip into such confusion and so lose stability. He is without reassurance, ever in a state of confusion. When someone moves away from the truth, he is pulled in all directions by different desires and motives, afflicted by doubt, hesitant, moving once to the right and once to the left. He has no solid basis, no safe refuge.

As the *sūrah* prepares to discuss their objections to resurrection, it touches on further aspects of this fundamental truth as it appears in the structure of the universe. It invites them to look at the heavens, the earth, mountains, rain, palm trees, gardens and plants. The style employed here is in full harmony with the magnificence of the solid truth: "*Do they not look at the sky above them: how We have built it and adorned it, leaving no flaws in it.*" (Verse 6)

The sky represents a page in the book of the universe, testifying to the truth they had abandoned. Do they not see its lofty and firm

structure, its adorned beauty and flawless freedom? Needless to say, stability, beauty and perfection are clear features common to both the sky and the truth. Hence they come in for special emphasis here, as do the facts that the sky is well built, adorned and is without holes and cracks in its structure.

Likewise, the earth is a page from the same book of the universe: "*We spread out the earth and set upon it firm mountains, and caused every kind of delectable plants to grow on it.*" (Verse 7) The wide spread of the earth, the firm mountains placed on it and the delectable plants that grow on it also project the same features of firmness, stability and beauty already associated with the sky.

Now that this universal image has been drawn, the *sūrah* touches their hearts directing them to reflect on the purpose of creation: "*so that it serves as a lesson and a reminder to everyone who wishes to turn to God.*" (Verse 8) Thus curtains are removed, insight is sharpened and hearts and souls are alerted to reflect on the origination, wisdom and harmony apparent in the universe. Such a reminder is especially useful to those who wish to turn to God.

This link between the human heart and the inspiration of the endless, beautiful universe is indeed what gives opening the book of the universe and contemplating it the effect it has on our hearts and the value it attaches to our lives. The Qur'ān establishes this link between knowledge and the man who has it. Yet this link is precisely that which is ignored by contemporary research methods that are often called 'scientific'. This also inevitably leads to a severance of the bond between people and the world they live in. Mankind is a part of the universe, and its life can only flourish when their hearts beat to the tune of the universe. Every new piece of knowledge about a star, a planet, a special characteristic or feature of a plant or an animal, or a feature of the universe as a whole and what it contains of animate or inanimate objects should be transformed into a message to the human heart that increases man's pleasant familiarity with the world around him. Thus are the bonds of friendship between human beings and other creatures strengthened, and the sense of unity that applies to all confirmed. This, in turn, stresses the oneness of God, the Creator of the universe and all it contains. Any knowledge, research

or scientific discipline that does not lead to this objective is incomplete, false or useless.

This universe is the open book of the truth, readable in all languages and by all methods. A simple person living in a hut or a tent can browse through it as easily as can a highly educated palace dweller, each according to their abilities, and each discovering that they have access to the truth through it. The book of the universe is open at all times: "*So that it serves as a lesson and a reminder to everyone who wishes to turn to God.*" (Verse 8) Modern science, however, blocks this reminder, severs this link between the human heart and the universe. Why? Because it is controlled by people who have been blinded by the falsehood called the 'scientific method', a method that does not acknowledge a link between the universe and all the creatures living in it.

The approach based on faith does not take away anything of the results of the 'scientific method' in understanding individual facts. Indeed, it adds a link connecting these individual facts and relating them to the great truths. It is faith that establishes a bond between the human heart and the laws and facts of the universe, allowing them to play an inspiring tune to man's feelings and life. They are no longer cold facts that open up nothing of their beautiful secrets. It is the approach based on faith therefore that should direct studies and research.

The *sūrah* continues to present the pages of truth in the book of the universe, in preparation for tackling the question of resurrection: "*We send down from the skies water rich in blessings, and We produce with it gardens and fields of grain, and tall palm trees laden with clusters of dates, providing sustenance suitable for people. Thus We bring dead land to life. So will people come forth from the dead.*" (Verses 9–11)

The water sent down from the sky is a great sign, sending life into hearts before it quickens dead land. It imparts a special feeling to all. It is not only children that rainfall delights; sensitive adults also experience a similar feeling of awe. The rain is described here as *'rich in blessings'*, and a means by which to produce fruits and fields of grain, as well as palm trees of great beauty: "*And tall palm trees laden with clusters of dates.*" The description of the fruits these trees bear is intended to highlight this beautiful aspect, emphasizing harmony with the overpowering and

beautiful truth the universe presents. A touch on human feelings is added within the context of the rain and what it brings about of plant life: "*providing sustenance suitable for people.*" It is God who gives this sustenance, from the time it sends forth its shoots until it gives its yield. He is the Master and they, the servants, remain oblivious of their duty to appreciate and show gratitude.

At this point, the final goal is identified. "*Thus We bring dead land to life. So will people come forth from the dead.*" (Verse 11) It is a continuing process, one that is familiar to them. However, they overlook it and this before they have even arrived at their objections. Yet resurrection is as simple as the shoot springing out of dead land after it has been quickened with rain. This is stated now, after a host of inspiring notes played for the human heart. Thus hearts are addressed by the Creator of hearts.

A Glance at History

The *sūrah* now opens some pages of the book of human history, speaking of the fate of past communities who argued about resurrection in the same way as did the Arab unbelievers, and who similarly denied God's messages. As a result, they incurred God's inevitable punishment:

> *Long before these unbelievers Noah's people also disbelieved, as did the people of al-Rass, Thamūd, 'Ād, Pharaoh, Lot's brethren, the dwellers of the wooded dales and the people of Tubba': they all disbelieved God's messengers, and therefore My warnings came true. Were We worn out by the first creation? Yet they are still in doubt about a second creation.* (Verses 12–15)

Al-Rass signifies a well over which there is no built wall, and the dales signifies an area thick with trees. The people of the wooded dales most probably refer to Shu'ayb's people. We have no information about the people of al-Rass other than this reference here and a similar one in *Sūrah al-Furqān*, (25: 38) The same applies to the people of Tubba', a title used by the Yemeni kings of the Ḥimyar dynasty. The other peoples mentioned in this short passage are known to anyone who reads the Qur'ān.

The purpose of this quick reference to these peoples is certainly not to give any detailed information about them. It is only a reminder of the fate of earlier disbelieving communities. What is worth noting is that the verse mentions that each denied 'God's messengers', in the plural. This emphasizes the unity of the divine message as all messengers preached the same faith. Thus, whoever denies anyone of God's messengers actually denies them all, because he rejects the same message delivered by them all. Gods' messengers are brothers forming one community. They are like a tree with roots stretching far back into time. Each branch of that tree projects all its essential qualities, giving an image of the whole. Therefore, whoever cuts a branch actually cuts the tree and all its branches. Therefore, God's warnings came true and those communities suffered the fates known to listeners.

Having stated the fates of all these communities, the *sūrah* again picks up the question of resurrection, asking: "*Were We worn out by the first creation? Yet they are still in doubt about a second creation.*" (Verse 15) The first creation is there before their eyes; therefore, the question needs no answer. However, because they do not look at the evidence presented by this first creation, they are in doubt about the second. What can be said about one who denies the truth when such irrefutable evidence is placed before his very own eyes?

A Journey Through Life

The second part of the *sūrah* continues with the theme of resurrection. It seeks to treat those hearts that deny resurrection from a new angle, but makes some frightening statements. It speaks about the accurate monitoring to which reference has been made in the Prologue. It presents clear images of this monitoring, followed by images of man in the throes of death, then we see the opening of records and the reckoning before we are shown hell opening to receive those destined for it. Whenever a new group of them are thrown into it, it asks whether it can have some more. This is contrasted by the scene of heaven and the honour and favours bestowed on its dwellers.

It is a single journey that begins with birth, goes through death and ends with resurrection and deed reckoning. It is a continuous, uninterrupted

journey, charting the only way we must travel. Throughout the journey we are in God's hands and under His careful watch. We cannot escape. When we realize this, our hearts are filled with awe and apprehension. How else should we feel realizing that we are in the hands of the Almighty who knows our innermost thoughts and who overlooks nothing?

When any of us thinks that the authorities, with all their intelligence and reporters, are after us, following our footsteps, we are perturbed and agitated. We lose our patience and our balance. No matter how widespread and far-reaching the intelligence apparatus is, any of us, however, can escape its attention once we close our door or our mouths. By contrast, God's watchful eye is with us wherever we may be. He monitors what is in our minds and knows all our secrets. What then should we feel, when we realize that we are under such watch, subject to the Almighty's power?

Every Little Secret

> *It is We who have created man, and We know what his soul whispers to him. We are closer to him than his jugular vein; with two receptors set to record, one on his right and one on his left, every word he utters [is noted down by] an ever-present watcher.* (Verses 16–18)

The first clause in these verses, '*it is We who have created man*', indicates its message. A person who makes a machine is the one who best knows how it is put together and how it functions. Its maker did not create it, because he is not the one who originated the material used in its making; he is only the one who designed and manufactured it. How does this compare with the Creator who originates all things? Man is made by God's hand, and God knows every little detail about him. Hence He says: "*We know what his soul whispers to him.*" (Verse 16) Thus man realizes that his inner thoughts are laid open. Nothing is hidden. Even the whispers of his soul, secret as these may be, are known to God, in preparation for the Day of Reckoning, which people often deny.

"*We are closer to him than his jugular vein.*" (Verse 16) Closer than the vein that transports his blood! This expression clearly describes the

hand in control and the direct watch. When man imagines this fact, he is bound to experience a shiver down his spine. If man really understood the import of this statement, he would not dare say a single word that does not please God. He would not even allow a fleeting thought that is contrary to what is acceptable to God. This statement is sufficient to make man careful, always alert.

The *sūrah* makes the control even stricter, showing man throughout his life as being under the ever-present watch of two angels, on his right and left, who record every move he makes, every word he says and every thought he entertains: "*with two receptors set to record, one on his right and one on his left, every word he utters [is noted down by] an ever-present watcher.*" (Verses 17–18) We do not know how these two angels record what they monitor. We need not in any case indulge in conjecture. Our attitude towards information that relates to the world beyond our perception is to accept it as it stands, believing in its import without seeking to know more. Such knowledge, were we to gain it, would not be of any use to us. In fact, it remains outside human experience.

In our own world, we have come to know some means of recording that could have never been thought possible by our forefathers. Magnetic and video tapes record movement and voice and reproduce them for radio, cinema and television.[2] All this happens within our own human environment. Hence, there is no need to try to assign to the angels a method of recording based on our own human experience, which may be totally irrelevant to their realm of which we know only what God has told us.

It is enough that we should appreciate this fact, expressed here in a vivid picture, and feel when we are about to make any movement or utter a word that, to our right and left, there are two watchguards taking note of whatever we do or say, entering it in our record which will be presented to God who overlooks nothing. This is a fact, even though we may not understand how it is done. There is no doubt that it takes place, in some form. God has told us about it so that we take it

2. The author wrote this in the late 1950s, when CDs and DVDs were still beyond people's imagination. – Editor's note.

into account, but also so we do not waste time and effort in trying to determine how it is done.

Such was the method adopted by people who benefited by the Qur'ān and by the Prophet's directives concerning the facts it speaks of. They took to heart what it said and acted on its basis. In a *ḥadīth* reported by 'Alqamah on the authority of Bilāl ibn al-Ḥārith, the Prophet is quoted as saying: "A man may say a word that is pleasing to God, without a thought of how far it can reach. God will credit him with His pleasure for it until the Day when he meets Him. Another man may say a word that is displeasing to God, without a thought of how far it can reach. God will record against him His displeasure for it until the Day when he meets Him." 'Alqamah commented: "Many are the words I refrained from saying on account of this hadith." [Related by Aḥmad, al-Tirmidhī, al-Nasā'ī and Ibn Mājah.] It is reported that when Imām Aḥmad was in the throes of death, he moaned in pain. It was said to him that even moans are recorded. He then stopped moaning until he died. In this way, such people practically lived the facts the Qur'ān tells us about.

As Life Draws to an End

That was the page of life, which is followed in man's book by the page of approaching death: "*The stupor of death brings with it the full truth: This is what you tried to escape.*" (Verse 19) There is nothing man tries to escape more than death. He even tries to banish the thought of death from his mind. Yet how can he do so when death is a seeker that never stops. It continues its steady march, and never misses its appointed time. The mere mention of '*the stupor of death*' sends a shiver into brave hearts. Yet as the scene is shown, it is said to him: "*This is what you tried to escape.*" The mere sound makes him shudder when he is still full of life. How about if it is said when he is in the throes of death? It is authentically reported that when death was approaching the Prophet, he wiped sweat off his face and said: "All glory be to God! Death has its stupor!" [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] He said this, even though he had chosen to be in God's company, longing to see Him. So how about ordinary mortals?

It is noteworthy that truth itself is mentioned here: "*The stupor of death brings with it the full truth.*" (Verse 19) This suggests that a human being sees the whole truth as he is about to die. The truth appears to him fully exposed. He sees what he did not know, and what he used to deny. It is, now too late for anything that may benefit him. It is too late for repentance, belief or the mending of ways. The unbelievers denied this very truth and their denial caused them confusion. Now that they realize all this, it is too late for them to do anything about it.

The *sūrah* now speaks about the shock of resurrection and the fearsome reckoning:

> *The trumpet will be blown: 'This is the day [you were] warned of.' Every soul will come attended by one who will drive it on and another to bear witness. 'Of this you have been unmindful, but We have lifted your veil and sharp is your sight today.' And his companion will say: 'Here is what I have recorded.' 'Cast into hell every hardened unbeliever, everyone who hindered good, was a sinful aggressor, fomenter of doubt, who set up another deity alongside God. Cast him into severe suffering.' His companion will say: 'Our Lord! I did not make him transgress. He had already gone far astray.' God will say: 'Do not argue in My presence, for I had forewarned you. My word will not be altered; but never do I do the least wrong to My creatures.'* (Verses 20–29)

It is sufficient to put this scene before our eyes, for thereafter we will spend the rest of our lives in awe and anticipation. The Prophet is quoted as saying: "'How can I feel happy when I know that the one assigned to blow the Trumpet has lifted it to his mouth, lowering his forehead and awaiting permission.' The people listening asked him: 'What should we say, Messenger of God?' He replied: 'Say: We seek none other than God; He is the best protector.' They all said it." [Related by al-Tirmidhī.]

"*Every soul will come attended by one who will drive it on and another to bear witness.*" (Verse 21) It is the soul, every single one, that is held to account, and it is the one who receives the outcome. It comes with two assigned to it: one driving it on and the other to bear witness. These may be the ones who recorded everything a person does throughout life, which is more probable, but they may also be different entities. The

scene is akin to that of taking someone to trial, but this trial is before the Almighty.

In this extremely difficult situation, the person is told: "*Of this you have been unmindful, but We have lifted your veil and sharp is your sight today.*" (Verse 22) There is nothing to blur your eyesight now. You can see clearly. This is the appointed time you ignored, the position you have not reckoned with, the end you did not expect. You can look all around you for your sight is now sharp indeed. At this point, his companion, which is most probably a reference to the witness who recorded all his actions, comes forward and says: "*Here is what I have recorded.*" (Verse 23)

The *sūrah* says nothing about examining the record. Instead, it states the divine verdict as it is given to the two angels: the one leading the person and the witness. They are told: "*Cast into hell every hardened unbeliever, everyone who hindered good, was a sinful aggressor, fomenter of doubt, who set up another deity alongside God. Cast him into severe suffering.*" (Verses 24–26) These descriptions make the situation even more critical, for they show that the Almighty is displeased. They are all negative descriptions that deserve increased punishment. They are followed by His repeating the order, which needs no emphasis anyway: "*Cast him into severe suffering,*" indicating the unbeliever's position in hell.

This scares his companion who, thinking that his long association with the condemned person may reflect on him, hastens to dissociate himself from his doings: "*His companion will say: 'Our Lord! I did not make him transgress. He had already gone far astray.'*" (Verse 27) The reference here may be to a different companion who submitted the records. This may be the devil who, throughout his life, tried to tempt him away from the truth. Now he tries to shirk his responsibility, asserting that the man was already far astray and, as such, accepted the tempting offer to go even further astray. There are other instances in the Qur'ān that tell us that the evil companion disowns the human one. Yet the first possibility we mentioned is also probable. The companion referred to in this verse could be the same angel who kept the record, but the hardship of the situation on the Day of Judgement makes him hasten to state his own

innocence even when he is truly innocent. He simply wants to prove that despite his long association with this miserable creature, he had no influence on his deeds. When an innocent person hastens to prove his truth-telling, this reveals much about the difficulty of the situation.

A final order is now issued to stop all argument: "*God will say: Do not argue in My presence, for I had forewarned you. My word will not be altered; but never do I do the least wrong to My creatures.*" (Verses 28–29) The occasion is not one for contention. Warnings were issued earlier, stating the nature of requital for every action. Everything has been recorded, and it is on the basis of this record that requital and reward are determined. No one is unjustly dealt with, for the one who looks into people's cases and determines their fate is the faultless arbiter.

Thus the fearsome scene of reckoning, with all its hardship, is thus ended, but the overall scene continues, with the *sūrah* revealing a more fearful aspect of it: "*On that day We will ask hell, 'Are you full?' and it will reply, 'Are there no more?'*" (Verse 30) The whole scene is one of dialogue. Therefore, hell is portrayed here in the same way, with a question put to it and an answer given. This reveals something that is both amazing and awesome. We see every hardened unbeliever, everyone who hindered good, who was a sinful aggressor, a fomenter of doubt being thrown into hell where they pile up in great numbers. Then hell is asked whether it has had its full. Its reply is that of an unsatiated glutton: "*Are there no more?*" How frightening!

A contrasting image is drawn on the other side: it is pleasant, calm and friendly. Heaven is shown drawing near to the righteous such that they can see it for themselves. An honourable welcome awaits them:

> *And paradise will be brought close to the righteous and will no longer be distant: 'This is what you have been promised; this is for everyone who used to turn to God and to keep Him in mind, who used to stand in awe of the Lord of Grace although He is beyond the reach of human perception, and who comes before Him with a heart full of devotion. Enter paradise in peace; this is the day when everlasting life begins.' There they shall have all that they desire, and We have even more for them.* (Verses 31–35)

Honour is shown with every word and move. Paradise is brought near so that they do not trouble themselves about going to it. The bliss of being accepted by God is extended to them there: "*This is what you have been promised; this is for everyone who used to turn to God and to keep Him in mind, who used to stand in awe of the Lord of Grace although He is beyond the reach of human perception, and who comes before Him with a heart full of devotion.*" It is those who are on high that state their qualities. Thus they realize that this is how they appear in God's records. Then they are admitted to heaven, in peace, a place from which they will not be turned out: "*Enter paradise in peace; this is the day when everlasting life begins.*" An announcement is made on high, noting their position and making it clear that their share with God is unlimited: "*There they shall have all that they desire, and We have even more for them.*" Whatever they may wish for will remain less than what is prepared for them. Since '*more*' is given by their Lord, it must be limitless.

An Easy Resurrection

The final part of the *sūrah* sounds like the final beat of a tune, as it repeats its strongest notes to an even faster time. It includes a glimpse of history and the fate of earlier unbelievers, an image from the open book of the universe and a new scene from the Day of Judgement, all coupled with a serious and inspiring directive:

> *How many a generation, far greater in power, have We destroyed before these [unbelievers]? They wandered through the lands seeking a place of refuge. In this there is a reminder for everyone who has an alert heart, or one who attentively listens and sees. We have indeed created the heavens and the earth and all that is in between in six days. No weariness could ever touch Us. Bear, then, with patience whatever they may say, and extol your Lord's limitless glory before the rising of the sun and before its setting; and in the night, too, extol His glory, and at the end of every prayer. And listen out for the day when the caller will call from a nearby place, the day when they will in truth hear the mighty blast; that is the day when they will come out [of their graves]. It is*

We who grant life and deal death; and to Us all shall return. On the day when the earth will be rent asunder all around them, letting them rush out. That gathering will be easy for Us. We are fully aware of what they say. You are not one to use coercion with them. Therefore, remind, with the Qur'ān, those who fear My warning. (Verses 36–45)

Although all these points have come under discussion earlier in the *sūrah*, they are repeated in conclusion with a new rhythm and added effect. They are noted here with more emphasis and greater speed. Thus they carry here a different effect from that produced by their more detailed discussion earlier. This is characteristic of the Qur'ānic style.

The *sūrah* stated earlier: "*Long before these unbelievers Noah's people also disbelieved, as did the people of al-Rass, Thamūd, 'Ād, Pharaoh, Lot's brethren, the dwellers of the wooded dales and the people of Tubba': They all disbelieved their messengers, and therefore My warnings came true.*" (Verses 12–14) Here at the end the *sūrah* says: "*How many a generation, far greater in power, have We destroyed before these [unbelievers]? they wandered through the lands seeking a place of refuge.*" (Verse 36) It is a reference to the same fact, but in its new image it looks different. Then the *sūrah* adds the turn of time as generations followed generations, wandering through the lands. However, they remain within God's grasp from which no one can escape. A further comment is added to give it a more serious effect: "*In this there is a reminder for everyone who has an alert heart, or one who attentively listens and sees.*" (Verse 37)

There is indeed a reminder in the fate suffered by earlier communities for anyone with a heart to consider. A person who is not reminded by this is one whose heart is dead, or who has always been without a feeling heart. Indeed, in order to have due admonition, it is sufficient that a person should listen attentively. The story will undoubtedly have its telling effect. This is certain, because the human soul is very sensitive to the fate suffered by earlier peoples. Even the slightest degree of sensitivity is enough to bring back memories and inspiring images of such situations.

Earlier, the *sūrah* opened pages from the book of the universe, stating: "*Do they not look at the sky above them: how We have built it and adorned*

it, leaving no flaws in it. We spread out the earth and set upon it firm mountains, and caused every kind of delectable plants to grow on it." (Verses 6–7) Now at the end of the *sūrah*, it says: "*We have indeed created the heavens and the earth and all that is in between in six days. No weariness could ever touch Us.*" (Verse 38) Thus it adds here a further touch, making it clear that the creation of everything in the universe, including the heavens and the earth, presented no difficulty for God. Compared with this, bringing the dead back to life is only a small matter.

A comment is then added, providing further shades and inspiration: "*Bear, then, with patience whatever they may say, and extol your Lord's limitless glory before the rising of the sun and before its setting; and in the night, too, extol His glory, and at the end of every prayer.*" (Verses 39–40) The rising and setting of the sun, and the spreading of the night after sunset, are all phenomena closely interlinked with the heavens and the earth. The *sūrah* delineates the bond between them, the glorification and praising of God and the prostrating of ourselves before Him. Within the same context, the *sūrah* also gives the instruction to bear patiently with whatever the unbelievers deny about resurrection and their refusal to believe in God's ability to bring creatures back to life. Thus a new aura of God's glorification, worship and patience is given to the same points repeated here. As this is all linked to aspects of the universe, these feelings are enhanced within a believer's heart whenever he looks at the skies or the earth, at every sunrise and approach of night, and whenever he prostrates himself before God.

A further touch is added to this portrait of the universe. The Prophet is instructed to have patience and to perform all this glorification and worship while remaining on the alert, expecting the great event that may come at any moment of the night or day. Only those who are totally oblivious of the truth will pay no attention to it. It is the event that provides the central theme of the *sūrah*: "*And listen out for the day when the caller will call from a nearby place, the day when they will in truth hear the mighty blast; that is the day when they will come out [of their graves]. It is We who grant life and deal death; and to Us all shall return. On the day when the earth will be rent asunder all around them, letting them rush out. That gathering will be easy for Us.*" (Verses 41–44)

What we have here is a new scene depicting that most difficult day. When the first reference to it is made in the *sūrah*, it is shown differently: "*The trumpet will be blown: 'This is the day [you were] warned of.' Every soul will come attended by one who will drive it on and another to bear witness...*" (Verses 20–21) Here the blowing of the trumpet is referred to as a '*mighty blast*'. It gives us a picture of how they will rush out as the earth is rent asunder all around them. This includes all those countless creatures of all generations, arising from graves they may have been buried in for a very long time. They are all ripped open, bringing up what remains of bones, dust, and lost cells in the earth. None except God knows their whereabouts. This, then, is an amazing image, one that the human mind can barely imagine.

Having drawn this bustling and inspirational scene, the *sūrah* states the truth which they deny and argue about: "*It is We who grant life and deal death; and to Us all shall return.*" (Verse 43) "*That gathering will be easy for Us.*" (Verse 44) This is the most suitable time to state this truth.

The *sūrah* finally reassures the Prophet so that he is not troubled by the unbelievers' denials of this truth and the arguments they make in disputing it: "*We are fully aware of what they say. You are not one to use coercion with them. Therefore, remind, with the Qur'ān, those who fear My warning.*" (Verse 45)

It is sufficient for you to reassure yourselves that "*We are fully aware of what they say.*" This is indeed an implicit warning of the consequences of this knowledge, which are bound to be terrible for them. "*You are not one to use coercion with them.*" You cannot force them to believe in God. You have no power over them. That power belongs to God alone. "*Therefore, remind, with the Qur'ān, those who fear My warning.*" (Verse 45) The Qur'ān shakes people's hearts. No heart that is alert and sensitive will ever reject the truths presented in the Qur'ān in its unique, remarkable style.

When a *sūrah* like this is presented, the matter does not require any mighty being to force people into submission to faith. The Qur'ān has far greater power than all tyrants could possess. A *sūrah* like this can easily produce on people's hearts an effect far more powerful than their whips. Whatever God says is the absolute truth.

SŪRAH 51

Al-Dhāriyāt

(The Scattering Winds)

Prologue

This *sūrah* has a special character. It begins by mentioning four forces that work by God's command, using ambiguous terms which give us an initial impression that we are being introduced to things wrapped in secrecy. God Almighty makes an oath by these four forces to emphasize a certain matter: "*By those that scatter far and wide; by those that are heavily laden; by those that speed along with gentle ease; by those that distribute by command; that which you are promised is true indeed, and, for certain, judgement is bound to come.*" (Verses 1–6)

The words used in this opening for those four forces mentioned in the oath, i.e. *al-dhāriyāt, al-ḥāmilāt, al-jāriyāt* and *al-muqassimāt*, are not usually used to refer to immediately recognized objects. They invite questions and requests for explanation. Indeed, their very sounds impart this feeling of ambiguity, which is perhaps intended so as to give the *sūrah* its particular aura.

The first oath is hardly stated when it is followed by a second. God states this oath "*By the sky and its starry pathways you people are at variance in what you say.*" (Verses 7–8) What you say is inconsistent, based on conjecture, not fact.

With this particular opening and by its general drift, the *sūrah* sets itself a particular objective, which is the establishment of a bond between

the human heart and the sky, or rather what lies beyond the reach of human perception and known only to God. The human heart will thus become free of the constraints of this world, unchained by anything that prevents it from being dedicated to God's service. It will then be ready to move unhindered towards Him: "*Flee, then, to God.*" (Verse 50) This would fulfil God's purpose of creation: "*I have not created the* jinn *and mankind for any end other than they may worship Me.*" (Verse 56)

Since preoccupation with one's livelihood and what the future may bring with regard to it is one of the hardest of these hindrances, the *sūrah* takes particular care to free man of it, and to reassure him so that his heart turns to God, free of earthly chains. References to this point are found in several places in the *sūrah*. For example, explicit references include: "*And in the sky is your sustenance and all that you are promised.*" (Verse 22) and "*God is indeed the Provider of all sustenance, the Lord of Power, the Ever Mighty.*" (Verse 58) Other references are implicit, as in the verse describing the attitude of the righteous towards money. They "*would give a rightful share of their possessions to the one who asks [for help] and the one who is deprived.*" (Verse 19) Likewise, the *sūrah* describes Abraham's hospitality and the welcome he gave to his guests, or rather the angels he thought to be his guests. When they greeted him, he went straight to his household and brought a fat calf, yet prior to their arrival at his doorstep, they were total strangers to him.

It is all, then, about freeing one's mind from the shackles of life on earth and earning one's living, so that one looks up to heaven, yearning for its bliss, eager to earn God's pleasure and seeking His acceptance. This is the focus of all the issues the *sūrah* raises. This explains the reason for its rather ambiguous start followed by an oath by the sky and the subsequent references made to it.

Thus we see in the picture the *sūrah* draws early on the main characteristics of those who are God-fearing: dedication to God, worship at night, sacrifice of money, assigning a portion of it to the poor and the deprived: "*The God-fearing will be amid gardens and springs. They will happily receive what their Lord will grant them; for they were keen to do good. They would sleep but little at night, and would pray for forgiveness at the time of dawn, and would give a rightful share of their possessions to the one who asks [for help] and the one who is deprived.*" (Verses 15–19)

To achieve the same purpose, the *sūrah* directs our attentions to God's signs on earth and within ourselves, while also emphasizing that provisions are given by heaven. We must not, therefore, give undue importance to its immediate means on earth: "*On earth there are signs for those with sure faith, and in yourselves too: can you not see? And in the sky is your sustenance and all that you are promised.*" (Verses 20–22)

The same may be said about the reference to the building of the skies with ample space, while the earth has been made easy for people to traverse, and to the fact that all creatures are created in pairs. All this leads to the all-important advice that we should all turn to God paying full heed to the warnings given by His Messenger: "*We built the skies with power; and We gave it a vast expanse; and We spread out the earth: how well have We prepared it! All things We have created in pairs, so that you may take thought. Flee, then, to God! I am sent by Him to give you clear warning.*" (Verses 47–50)

The *sūrah* concludes with a statement reiterating the same message, making clear the purpose of creating humans and *jinn*, and their major roles in life: "*I have not created the* jinn *and mankind to any end other than they may worship Me. No sustenance do I require of them, nor do I require that they should feed Me. God is indeed the Provider of all sustenance, the Lord of Power, the Ever Mighty.*" (Verses 56–58)

Thus the *sūrah* plays on the same theme throughout, using different tunes but maintaining the same beat, directing man's heart to look to the sky.

The *sūrah* includes quick references to the stories of Abraham, Lot, Moses, the 'Ād, the Thamūd and Noah's people. In its account of Abraham, the *sūrah* makes a quick reference to money, as well as the realm beyond our perception when he is given the happy news of the birth of a son to be endowed with knowledge. He and his wife are given this child when they could have never expected it. In the other stories, the reference is mainly to the fact that God's promise always comes true, just as it is emphatically stated at the beginning: "*That which you are promised is true indeed.*" (Verse 5) Another reference to this is made at the conclusion, where the unbelievers are issued with a clear warning: "*The wrongdoers shall have their share [of evil] like their predecessors. Let them not ask Me to hasten it.*" (Verse 59) This comes after the statement that

implies that generations of unbelievers seem to have recommended to each other that they reject God's messengers: "*Thus whenever a messenger came to those that lived before them, they also said: 'He is but a sorcerer, or maybe a madman.' Have they, perchance, handed down this legacy to one another? No! They are people who transgress all bounds.*" (Verses 52–53)

Thus the historical accounts in the *sūrah* are closely related to its main theme, namely, pure and complete heart devotion to God, freeing it from all hindrances, strengthening its bond with heaven, first by faith and then by removing obstacles that prevent man from flying to that open horizon.

Al-Dhāriyāt
(The Scattering Winds)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

By the winds that scatter far and wide; (1)

وَالذَّارِيَاتِ ذَرْوًا ﴿١﴾

by those [clouds] that are heavily laden; (2)

فَالْحَامِلَاتِ وِقْرًا ﴿٢﴾

by those that speed along with gentle ease; (3)

فَالْجَارِيَاتِ يُسْرًا ﴿٣﴾

by those that distribute by command; (4)

فَالْمُقَسِّمَاتِ أَمْرًا ﴿٤﴾

that which you are promised is true indeed, (5)

إِنَّمَا تُوعَدُونَ لَصَادِقٌ ﴿٥﴾

and, for certain, judgement is bound to come. (6)

وَإِنَّ الدِّينَ لَوَاقِعٌ ﴿٦﴾

By the sky and its starry pathways (7)

وَالسَّمَاءِ ذَاتِ الْحُبُكِ ﴿٧﴾

you people are at variance in what you say, (8)

إِنَّكُمْ لَفِي قَوْلٍ مُخْتَلِفٍ ﴿٨﴾

abandoned by whoever wishes to turn away. (9)

يُؤْفَكُ عَنْهُ مَنْ أُفِكَ ﴿٩﴾

Perish the ones given to blind guessing (10)

قُتِلَ ٱلْخَرَّٰصُونَ ﴿١٠﴾

who are steeped in error, heedless of the truth. (11)

ٱلَّذِينَ هُمْ فِى غَمْرَةٍ سَاهُونَ ﴿١١﴾

They ask: ‘When will this Day of Judgement come?’ (12)

يَسْـَٔلُونَ أَيَّانَ يَوْمُ ٱلدِّينِ ﴿١٢﴾

That will be a day when they will be sorely tried by the fire. (13)

يَوْمَ هُمْ عَلَى ٱلنَّارِ يُفْتَنُونَ ﴿١٣﴾

Taste this your trial! This is what you were keen to hasten. (14)

ذُوقُوا۟ فِتْنَتَكُمْ هَٰذَا ٱلَّذِى كُنتُم بِهِۦ تَسْتَعْجِلُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

The God-fearing will be amid gardens and springs. (15)

إِنَّ ٱلْمُتَّقِينَ فِى جَنَّٰتٍ وَعُيُونٍ ﴿١٥﴾

They will happily receive what their Lord will grant them; for they were keen to do good. (16)

ءَاخِذِينَ مَآ ءَاتَىٰهُمْ رَبُّهُمْ ۚ إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا۟ قَبْلَ ذَٰلِكَ مُحْسِنِينَ ﴿١٦﴾

They would sleep but little at night, (17)

كَانُوا۟ قَلِيلًا مِّنَ ٱلَّيْلِ مَا يَهْجَعُونَ ﴿١٧﴾

and would pray for forgiveness at the time of dawn, (18)

وَبِٱلْأَسْحَارِ هُمْ يَسْتَغْفِرُونَ ﴿١٨﴾

and would give a rightful share of their possessions to the one who asks [for help] and the one who is deprived. (19)

وَفِىٓ أَمْوَٰلِهِمْ حَقٌّ لِّلسَّآئِلِ وَٱلْمَحْرُومِ ﴿١٩﴾

On earth there are signs for those with sure faith, (20)

وَفِي ٱلْأَرْضِ ءَايَٰتٌ لِّلْمُوقِنِينَ ٢٠

and in yourselves too: can you not see? (21)

وَفِيٓ أَنفُسِكُمْۚ أَفَلَا تُبْصِرُونَ ٢١

And in the sky is your sustenance and all that you are promised. (22)

وَفِي ٱلسَّمَآءِ رِزْقُكُمْ وَمَا تُوعَدُونَ ٢٢

By the Lord of the heavens and the earth, all this is the very truth, just as true as you are endowed with speech. (23)

فَوَرَبِّ ٱلسَّمَآءِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ إِنَّهُۥ لَحَقٌّ مِّثْلَ
مَآ أَنَّكُمْ تَنطِقُونَ ٢٣

Have you heard the story of Abraham's honoured guests? (24)

هَلْ أَتَىٰكَ حَدِيثُ ضَيْفِ إِبْرَٰهِيمَ
ٱلْمُكْرَمِينَ ٢٤

They went in to see him and bade him peace. He answered, 'Peace,' [and added to himself] 'These are strangers.' (25)

إِذْ دَخَلُواْ عَلَيْهِ فَقَالُواْ سَلَٰمًاۖ قَالَ سَلَٰمٌ
قَوْمٌ مُّنكَرُونَ ٢٥

He turned quickly to his household and brought out a fat calf. (26)

فَرَاغَ إِلَىٰٓ أَهْلِهِۦ فَجَآءَ بِعِجْلٍ سَمِينٍ ٢٦

He placed it before them, saying: 'Will you not eat?' (27)

فَقَرَّبَهُۥٓ إِلَيْهِمْ قَالَ أَلَا تَأْكُلُونَ ٢٧

He then became apprehensive of them, but they said: 'Do not be afraid.' They gave him the good news of [the birth of] a son who would be endowed with knowledge. (28)

فَأَوْجَسَ مِنْهُمْ خِيفَةً قَالُوا۟ لَا تَخَفْ وَبَشَّرُوهُ بِغُلَٰمٍ عَلِيمٍ ﴿٢٨﴾

His wife then came in with a loud cry, struck her face, and said: 'A barren old woman!' (29)

فَأَقْبَلَتِ ٱمْرَأَتُهُۥ فِى صَرَّةٍ فَصَكَّتْ وَجْهَهَا وَقَالَتْ عَجُوزٌ عَقِيمٌ ﴿٢٩﴾

Replied they: 'Thus will it be. This is what your Lord said. He is the Wise, the All-Knowing.' (30)

قَالُوا۟ كَذَٰلِكِ قَالَ رَبُّكِ إِنَّهُۥ هُوَ ٱلْحَكِيمُ ٱلْعَلِيمُ ﴿٣٠﴾

Said Abraham: 'What is your errand, messengers?' (31)

قَالَ فَمَا خَطْبُكُمْ أَيُّهَا ٱلْمُرْسَلُونَ ﴿٣١﴾

They replied: 'We have been sent to a people lost in sin, (32)

قَالُوٓا۟ إِنَّآ أُرْسِلْنَآ إِلَىٰ قَوْمٍ مُّجْرِمِينَ ﴿٣٢﴾

to bring down on them stones of clay, (33)

لِنُرْسِلَ عَلَيْهِمْ حِجَارَةً مِّن طِينٍ ﴿٣٣﴾

marked as from your Lord for those who transgressed all bounds. (34)

مُّسَوَّمَةً عِندَ رَبِّكَ لِلْمُسْرِفِينَ ﴿٣٤﴾

We brought out such believers as were there; (35)

فَأَخْرَجْنَا مَن كَانَ فِيهَا مِنَ ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٣٥﴾

but We did not find there any who had surrendered themselves to Us apart from a single house. (36)

فَمَا وَجَدْنَا فِيهَا غَيْرَ بَيْتٍ مِّنَ ٱلْمُسْلِمِينَ ﴿٣٦﴾

We left there a sign for those who fear the grievous suffering. (37)

وَتَرَكْنَا فِيهَا ءَايَةً لِّلَّذِينَ يَخَافُونَ
ٱلْعَذَابَ ٱلْأَلِيمَ ﴿٣٧﴾

In Moses, too, there is a sign: We sent him to Pharaoh with clear authority; (38)

وَفِى مُوسَىٰٓ إِذْ أَرْسَلْنَٰهُ إِلَىٰ فِرْعَوْنَ
بِسُلْطَٰنٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٣٨﴾

but Pharaoh turned away in the pride of his power and said [of Moses]: 'He is but a sorcerer, or maybe a madman.' (39)

فَتَوَلَّىٰ بِرُكْنِهِۦ وَقَالَ سَٰحِرٌ أَوْ مَجْنُونٌ ﴿٣٩﴾

We seized him and his hosts, and cast them all into the sea: he was the one to blame. (40)

فَأَخَذْنَٰهُ وَجُنُودَهُۥ فَنَبَذْنَٰهُمْ فِى ٱلْيَمِّ
وَهُوَ مُلِيمٌ ﴿٤٠﴾

In the 'Ād there is another sign: We let loose against them a life-destroying wind (41)

وَفِى عَادٍ إِذْ أَرْسَلْنَا عَلَيْهِمُ ٱلرِّيحَ ٱلْعَقِيمَ ﴿٤١﴾

which reduced to dust everything it came upon. (42)

مَا تَذَرُ مِن شَىْءٍ أَتَتْ عَلَيْهِ إِلَّا جَعَلَتْهُ
كَٱلرَّمِيمِ ﴿٤٢﴾

And in Thamūd, too, when they were told: 'You can enjoy your life for a while,' (43)

وَفِى ثَمُودَ إِذْ قِيلَ لَهُمْ تَمَتَّعُوا۟ حَتَّىٰ
حِينٍ ﴿٤٣﴾

but they insolently defied their Lord's commandment. So, the thunderbolt struck them while they were helplessly looking on. (44)

فَعَتَوْا۟ عَنْ أَمْرِ رَبِّهِمْ فَأَخَذَتْهُمُ ٱلصَّٰعِقَةُ
وَهُمْ يَنظُرُونَ ﴿٤٤﴾

They were unable even to rise; nor could they defend themselves. (45)

فَمَا ٱسْتَطَٰعُوا۟ مِن قِيَامٍ وَمَا كَانُوا۟
مُنتَصِرِينَ ﴿٤٥﴾

And the people of Noah before them: they too were people lost in evil. (46)

وَقَوْمَ نُوحٍ مِّن قَبْلُ ۖ إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا۟
قَوْمًا فَٰسِقِينَ ﴿٤٦﴾

We built the skies with power; and We gave it a vast expanse; (47)

وَٱلسَّمَآءَ بَنَيْنَٰهَا بِأَيْي۟دٍ وَإِنَّا لَمُوسِعُونَ ﴿٤٧﴾

and We spread out the earth: how well have We prepared it! (48)

وَٱلْأَرْضَ فَرَشْنَٰهَا فَنِعْمَ ٱلْمَٰهِدُونَ ﴿٤٨﴾

All things We have created in pairs, so that you may take thought. (49)

وَمِن كُلِّ شَىْءٍ خَلَقْنَا زَوْجَيْنِ
لَعَلَّكُمْ تَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿٤٩﴾

Flee, then, to God! I am sent by Him to give you clear warning; (50)

فَفِرُّوٓا۟ إِلَى ٱللَّهِ ۖ إِنِّى لَكُم مِّنْهُ نَذِيرٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٥٠﴾

and do not associate partners with Him: I am sent by Him to give you clear warning! (51)

وَلَا تَجْعَلُوا۟ مَعَ ٱللَّهِ إِلَٰهًا ءَاخَرَ ۖ إِنِّى
لَكُم مِّنْهُ نَذِيرٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٥١﴾

Thus whenever a messenger came to those that lived before them, they also said: 'He is but a sorcerer, or maybe a madman.' (52)

كَذَٰلِكَ مَآ أَتَى ٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِهِم مِّن
رَّسُولٍ إِلَّا قَالُوا۟ سَاحِرٌ أَوْ مَجْنُونٌ ﴿٥٢﴾

Have they, perchance, handed down this legacy to one another? No! They are people who transgress all bounds. (53)

أَتَوَاصَوْا۟ بِهِۦ ۚ بَلْ هُمْ قَوْمٌ طَاغُونَ ﴿٥٣﴾

Turn, then, away from them: you shall incur no blame; (54)

فَتَوَلَّ عَنْهُمْ فَمَآ أَنتَ بِمَلُومٍ ﴿٥٤﴾

and go on reminding all. Such a reminder will benefit those who believe. (55)

وَذَكِّرْ فَإِنَّ ٱلذِّكْرَىٰ تَنفَعُ ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٥٥﴾

I have not created the *jinn* and mankind to any end other than they may worship Me. (56)

وَمَا خَلَقْتُ ٱلْجِنَّ وَٱلْإِنسَ
إِلَّا لِيَعْبُدُونِ ﴿٥٦﴾

No sustenance do I require of them, nor do I require that they should feed Me. (57)

مَآ أُرِيدُ مِنْهُم مِّن رِّزْقٍ وَمَآ أُرِيدُ أَن
يُطْعِمُونِ ﴿٥٧﴾

God is indeed the Provider of all sustenance, the Lord of Power, the Ever Mighty. (58)

إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ هُوَ ٱلرَّزَّاقُ ذُو ٱلْقُوَّةِ ٱلْمَتِينُ ﴿٥٨﴾

The wrongdoers shall have their share [of evil] like their predecessors. Let them not ask Me to hasten it. (59)

فَإِنَّ لِلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا۟ ذَنُوبًا مِّثْلَ ذَنُوبِ
أَصْحَٰبِهِمْ فَلَا يَسْتَعْجِلُونِ ﴿٥٩﴾

Woe betide the unbelievers on the day they have been promised. (60)	

A True Promise

By those that scatter far and wide; By those that are heavily laden; By those that speed along with gentle ease; By those that distribute by command; That which you are promised is true indeed, and, for certain, judgement is bound to come. (Verses 1–6)

The *sūrah* begins with a quick beat, using ambiguous phrases to imply that it is talking about a serious matter that deserves our full attention. Inevitably though, the four ambiguous words used in the first four verses – *al-dhāriyāt, al-ḥāmilāt, al-jāriyāt* and *al-muqassimāt* – have made people ask questions, even in the very early days of Islam, as they sought further explanation. In this respect, Ibn Kathīr reports:

> 'Alī was on the pulpit in Kufah one day when he said: 'If you have any query about a verse in the Qur'ān or a ḥadīth by the Prophet, I will give you an answer.' Ibn al-Kawwā' asked him the meaning of *al-dhāriyāt*, [those that scatter], and he answered, 'the winds'. Then he said: 'What about *al-ḥāmilāt* [those heavily laden]?' 'Alī answered, 'the clouds'. The man then asked about *al-jāriyāt* [those that speed along], and 'Alī's answer was, 'the ships'. The man asked: 'What about *al-muqassimāt* [those that distribute]?' 'Alī said, 'the angels'.[1]

Ṣabīgh ibn 'Isl al-Tamīmī asked 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb about these words and his reply was the same as above. 'Umar felt, however, that al-Tamīmī was asking only for argument's sake, thereby hinting at the ambiguity. By way of reprimand for his behaviour, 'Umar banned him from future social gatherings. Subsequently, Ṣabīgh al-Tamīmī repented

1. Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Aẓīm*, Dār el-Ma'rifah, Beirut, 1987, Vol. 4, p. 248.

and swore most seriously that he no longer entertained any of his earlier doubts. This report suggests that the ambiguity contained in these words encouraged those who tried to raise doubts about the Qur'ān, making such words the point of their questioning. The same explanation of these words was given by Ibn 'Abbās, Ibn 'Umar, Mujāhid, Sa'īd ibn Jubayr, al-Ḥasan, Qatādah, al-Suddī and many others.

God states an oath by the winds that move and scatter things such as dust, grain, pollen, clouds and other material known or unknown to us; by the clouds carrying water and driven by God Almighty to wherever He pleases; by the ships that easily float on water making use of the characteristics God has given to water, shipping and the whole universe, and by the angels carrying God's commands and delivering them as He pleases, giving details as to what matters they are concerned with.

The winds, the clouds, the ships and the angels are all God's creatures which He uses as a means to implement His will with regard to the universe and His servants. By using them in His oath, He draws attention to them and what they signify. In this way we are able to reflect on how God initiates these creatures, sets them in operation and uses them to fulfil what He wishes to be fulfilled. Mentioning them in this way invites our minds to think about the secrets they embody so that we look to their Creator. They may also, in some way, relate to the issue of sustenance, preoccupation with which the *sūrah* wants to free us from. The winds, the clouds and the ships have a definite connection with sustenance. Moreover, sustenance is one of the things that the angels distribute by God's command. Thus, we clearly see the relation between this opening and one of the main topics of the *sūrah*.

God states an oath by these four types of creation, confirming that "*that which you are promised is true indeed, and, for certain, judgement is bound to come.*" (Verses 5–6) God has promised mankind that He will reward their good actions with what is better, and that He will requite their bad deeds with what is bad. If He delays holding them to account during their lives on earth, He will not ignore doing so in the life to come, where all reckoning and accounting will inevitably take place: "*For certain, judgement is bound to come.*" (Verse 6) The promise is undoubtedly true, and will be fulfilled in either life. He has also

promised people that their sustenance, in plenty or limited measure, is guaranteed. Again His promise in this matter is true.

God's promise to mankind is sure to be realized in the way and at the time He chooses. This needs no oath from Him. However, He makes this oath by these four types of His creation to draw attention to them, as they clearly point to His power and planning. When we contemplate these entities we have a clearer impression of the truth of God's promise and, therefore, our accountability for our deeds will inevitably take place. By their very nature, these entities suggest that life is not the result of idle play, accident or blind coincidence. Indeed, the oath leads us to view them as proofs of the divine message.

Differences and Blind Guessing

The same may be said about the second oath: "*By the sky and its starry pathways you people are at variance in what you say, abandoned by whoever wishes to turn away.*" (Verses 7–9) This oath is by the sky that is perfectly built, with pathways that are carefully interconnected, like the links of a chain. This may be one form clouds take as they gather in the sky, looking like a watery or sandy surface during or after a windy period. On the other hand, this description may be true of the permanent order of orbits that are perfectly coordinated and probably interconnected.

This oath, by the perfectly arranged sky, confirms that the unbelievers are at variance in what they say and believe. Their stand is shaky, lacking roots and foundations. People may abandon belief at will, or stick to it if they wish. There is no general agreement or coordination as to its validity. The situation is one of perpetual confusion and worry. Such is falsehood: shifting grounds and a maze without markings or light. It is always shifting like a desert sand, lacking firm basis and accurate measure. When people agree on some aspect of faith, they soon diverge and find themselves in dispute. Their confusion is seen even more clearly when it is shown against the background of the sky, which is perfectly ordered and coordinated.

The *sūrah* goes on to state that the unbelievers are deluded about the major question of the life to come. Their opinions are without a firm or true basis. They argue and dispute about a clear question of truth.

It then goes on to portray the Day of Judgement in such a way as they can actually see it:

> *Perish the ones given to blind guessing who are steeped in error, heedless of the truth. They ask: 'When will this Day of Judgement come?' That will be a day when they will be sorely tried by the fire. Taste this your trial! This is what you were keen to hasten.* (Verses 10–14)

Such people indulge in blind guessing. It is God who invokes their killing. How terrible! Needless to say, such an invocation is a firm sentence, one that is certain to be enforced. "*Perish the ones given to blind guessing.*" (Verse (10) Further clarification of their identity is added: "*who are steeped in error, heedless of the truth.*" (Verse 11) They are so steeped in delusion and falsehood that they are unable to wake themselves up. The *sūrah* shows them to be totally unaware of anything around them, as if they are excessively drunk. They cannot see for themselves something that is very clear to anyone with a sound mind. "*They ask: When will this Day of Judgement come?"* (Verse 12) It is not a question that seeks information; rather, it is an expression of doubt and denial. Therefore, the *sūrah* shows them their position on that day which they claim to be highly improbable: "*That will be a day when they will be sorely tried by the fire.*" (Verse 13) They will burn in the fire just as some metals are exposed to fire to determine their make up. This burning is coupled with strong remonstration: "*Taste this your trial! This is what you were keen to hasten.*" (Verse 14) A quick scene showing their miserable end is the most fitting answer to their question that sought no information. This powerful scene of their end contrasts with the state of confusion that plagues their lives. Moreover, it confirms that God's invocation of their deaths is fulfilled in a most terrible way.

At the Opposite End

Next, a contrasting image is drawn. This depicts a different group, reassured in their certainty, eager to do what is good without boasting about it, fully awake at night when they volunteer their night worship:

> *The God-fearing will be amid gardens and springs. They will happily receive what their Lord will grant them; for they were keen to do good. They would sleep but little at night, and would pray for forgiveness at the time of dawn, and would give a rightful share of their possessions to the one who asks [for help] and the one who is deprived.* (Verses 15–19)

This group are fully alert, sensitive to the fact that God watches them and, therefore, they carefully watch their own behaviour. These will be placed "*amid gardens and springs. They will happily receive what their Lord will grant them.*" (Verses 15–16) God grants them blessings in abundance as a reward for what they do in this their first life, worshipping Him as if they see Him and realizing that He sees them: "*for they were keen to do good.*" (Verse 16) Their desire to excel is portrayed in a splendid image: "*They would sleep but little at night, and would pray for forgiveness at the time of dawn,*" (Verses 17–18) They are the ones who stay up at night when others are fast asleep. They turn to their Lord, appealing to Him to forgive them their sins. They sleep but little during the night, preferring to address their Lord and enjoy the pleasure of being in close contact with Him, when no one else is aware of that contact.

Al-Ḥasan says in commenting on the verse, "*They would sleep but little at night*": "They offered voluntary night worship, sleeping only a little and extending their worship until the late hours, shortly before dawn, when they would pray for forgiveness." Qatādah quotes al-Aḥnaf ibn Qays's comment after reading this verse: "They slept only for a short while at night. I am not one to which this verse applies." Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī cites al-Aḥnaf ibn Qays's comment: "I tried to compare my work to that of the people of heaven and I discovered that those people are ahead of us by a long way. We cannot aspire to what they achieved, sleeping but little at night. I then tried to compare my work to that of the people of hell and I found out that those are devoid of goodness, denying God's revelations and His messengers, refusing to believe in resurrection after death. I concluded that the best among us are those who mix good deeds with bad ones."

A man said to Zayd ibn Aslam that he felt that this quality of spending much of the night in voluntary worship does not apply to their

generation who only spend a little of the night time in such worship. Zayd said to him: "Blessed is the one who sleeps when he is sleepy and remains God-fearing when awake."

This is a standard to which a number of the *Tābi'īn* generation that immediately followed the Prophet's Companions, known for their firm belief and piety, aspired to. They felt that they were well below it. It is the standard only achieved by the elite God has chosen and who have been shown the way to achieve it.

This is their situation with regard to their relations with God. As for their relations with people and their attitude to money, these people are of the type that is keen to do good: they "*would give a rightful share of their possessions to the one who asks [for help] and the one who is deprived.*" (Verse 19) They not only give a share of what they have to those who ask for help and the one who is too shy to ask and thus remains deprived of help, but they make that a rightful share, committing themselves to it as though they are duty bound to do so even though it is voluntary.

This point fits well with the treatment of the issue of possessions and earnings in the *sūrah*, as it helps to free the believer's heart of the shackles of personal greed and their preoccupation with livelihood. It also serves to prepare us for the next section of the *sūrah*.

Signs Galore

> *On earth there are signs for those with sure faith, and in yourselves too: can you not see? And in the sky is your sustenance and all that you are promised. By the Lord of the heavens and the earth, all this is the very truth, just as true as you are endowed with speech.* (Verses 20–23)

These verses turn our attentions to the countless signs testifying to God's oneness, both on earth and within ourselves. They also guide us to look to heaven for our means of sustenance, as it is all measured. They finish with a great oath by God Himself, the Lord of the heavens and earth, confirming that the message given to them from Him is absolutely true.

"*On earth there are signs for those with sure faith, and in yourselves too: can you not see?*" (Verses 20–21) The earth on which we live is a great exhibition of God's signs and marvels. Until now, mankind has only been able to see a little of these marvels, even though we discover each day something new and remarkable. Likewise, there is a similarly breathtaking exhibition that takes place within us, within the human soul with its marvellous secrets that mirror those of the universe. These two short verses refer to these two great exhibitions, opening their gates wide for anyone who wishes to look and have faith. Such a person will, as a result, fill his life with pleasure and enjoyment, profound lessons and a wealth of true knowledge.

Qur'ānic texts are phrased in such a way as to make them relevant for all times, environments and situations. They can give every person, every mind and every understanding a wealth of knowledge that each is perfectly able to handle. As man's knowledge increases, his faculties of understanding develop, his experience broadens, and as he becomes more aware of the secrets of the universe and of his own self, he receives more of the import of the Qur'ānic texts. As the Prophet declares: "the Qur'ān is a book of endless marvels. It remains new no matter how repeatedly it is read." The Prophet who said this was the man on whom the Qur'ān was bestowed from on high and who understood its secrets and lived them fully. His description was based on the most direct and personal of experiences.

Those who were the first to listen to the Qur'ān saw of God's signs on earth and in themselves their share, according to their knowledge, experience and inspiration. Every succeeding generation also received their shares according to whatever further knowledge and experience they had accumulated. We, in our turn, have our own share in line with our increased knowledge in different fields, and with what we have been able to discover of the secrets of the universe. Those who come after us will also find a share kept for them of secrets yet unknown to man, in both the earth and within the human soul. These two exhibitions will remain, to the end of time, majestic, full of new wonders.

This planet earth was made ready to support life in a way that is almost unique in what we know of this great universe, with its unlimited number of planets and stars. What we know of these, which is only a

fraction of what we do not know, includes millions of galaxies, each of which contains hundreds of millions of stars, as well as planets, which are satellites of these stars. Yet out of such countless numbers, the earth uniquely seems to be the only one suited for this type of life. Should any of the many special characteristics of the earth change or be disturbed, life as we know it will become impossible on earth. If the earth's size changes so that it becomes larger or smaller, or if a change affects the position of the earth in relation to the sun, or the sun's size or level of heat, or the angle of the earth's axis, or its rotation in place, or the speed of its movement in its orbit, or the size of the moon, or its distance from it, or the proportion of sea to dry land, etc. no life on earth would be possible. Is this not a great sign, or a multitude of signs, for us to contemplate?

Consider also the endless variety of foods stored in the earth for all creatures that live on it, fly in its atmosphere, swim its waters, hide in its caves, and who disappear underground. Some types of food are simple, others are complex and sophisticated. They are available in all types and shapes to meet the endless needs of endless numbers and types of creatures. Such a great variety of food, including what may be inside the earth, or in its atmosphere, or growing on its surface, or may come from the sun or other worlds beyond, is given in due measure and proportion in accordance with the divine will that created the earth and made it a cradle for this type of life, equipping it with all that is needed.

Consider further the scenes of what the earth presents, wherever you look or move. There are no end of wonderful scenes: flat grounds and lowlands, hills and valleys, lakes and seas, rivers and streams, vineyards and fields of grains and date-palms of different varieties, etc. Every one of these scenes undergoes change by the creative hand whose inventiveness never stops. We pass by any of these in the dry season and capture a certain essence of it, and then we pass by again in the rainy season to find a totally different essence. It presents a third image at the time of growth and yet another totally different one at harvest time. Yet it is all in the same spot, unable to move an inch.

Then consider the creatures that live on earth: plants, animals, birds, fish, reptiles and insects. We need not mention mankind because the *sūrah* gives it special focus. We cannot give a figure for the number of

kinds and species of these creatures, let alone give accurate figures of their individual populations. Every kind is a community of its own; each individual is a great wonder: every animal, bird, reptile, worm and shoot. Indeed, the wonder extends further to every petal of a flower and every stalk in a leaf. Each presents a great exhibition with endless marvels. In this way, the *sūrah* alerts human minds to reflect and contemplate so that they appreciate and enjoy these wonders throughout their lives' journey.

Yet none truly appreciates these wonders and enjoys these pleasures except one whose heart carries the certainty of faith: "*On earth there are signs for those with sure faith.*" (Verse 20) It is only such certainty that brings the heart alive so that it sees, understands and appreciates the creating power behind them. Without such certainty, all remains cold and hollow, speechless and lifeless, while the heart remains unresponsive. Many are those who pass through this great open exhibition with closed eyes and hearts. They neither feel its life force nor understand its language, and all because they are devoid of that certainty of faith. Some may be reputable scientists, but "*they only know the outer surface of this world's life.*" (30: 7) The truth beyond the outer surface remains closed to them, because hearts can only open to receive the truth of existence by the key of faith and can only see it in the light of certainty.

Man: A World of Wonders

The other wonder that walks on earth is mentioned in the next verse: "*And in yourselves too: can you not see?*" (Verse 21) Man is indeed the greatest wonder, or miracle on earth, although he is often oblivious to his own real status and to the secret wonders in his own constitution. He is a great wonder in his outer and inner self; his body and soul. When man begins to think about himself, he always finds some great wonder to contemplate: the way his organs are made, their distribution in his body, their functions and the way they perform those functions; how food is digested and assimilated; the process of breathing; blood circulation; the neurological system; the glands and what they produce to ensure physical growth and keep the body functioning, as also the perfect coordination,

harmony and cooperation between all these systems. Every wonderful aspect encompasses many other wonders. Indeed, in every organ and part of an organ there is an amazing wonder.

Then there are the secrets of man's soul and its known and unknown abilities: how he understands, retains and retrieves information. Where are information and images stored and how? How and where are such images, scenes and visions printed, and how are they retrieved? In all this, we are speaking about abilities known to us. What is unknown is even greater. We see occasional glimpses of these during moments of great inspiration, pointing to what is beyond our current reach.

Consider also the bewildering nature of human procreation: one cell carries the entire treasure of characteristics of the human race, as well as the special characteristics of both parents and nearer grandparents. Where are all these characteristics stored within the single microscopic cell? How does it recognize, by itself, its long history and represent it so accurately, eventually culminating in reproducing this amazing creature called man?

A short pause at the moment when a newborn starts its life on earth, separating from its mother and starting its own independent life, allowing its heart and lungs to function and begin life is enough to leave us speechless. It is enough to give us an overwhelming feeling of faith. A similar pause for reflection on the moment when a newborn begins to use its tongue to utter its first sounds, syllables, words and then phrases, indeed reflection on the mechanics of speech, the vocalization through the tongue and the larynx, gives us the feeling that we are looking at a great miracle, one that we tend to take for granted because of its familiarity. Yet on reflection we can appreciate the truth that this great wonder could only have come from God. Indeed every small aspect of the creature that is man is a miracle that leaves us absolutely amazed: "*And in yourselves too: can you not see?*" (Verse 21)

Every individual human being is a world of its own; a mirror reflecting the whole universe in a special and unique image that is not repeated at any moment in history. There is no parallel for any one person in the entire human race, whether in shape, features, mind, faculties, spirit, feelings or even in the way the universe is reflected in that person's mind.

In this divine museum that includes millions of millions of individuals, each one is a unique sample that can never be repeated in the same way as fingerprints are unrepeated throughout human history.

Many of the wonders of the human race are open for all to see: "*And in yourselves too: can you not see?*" (Verse 21) What we see of these wonders point to that which we cannot see. These wonders cannot be listed in a book. Indeed, what we know of them will take volumes to explain and what is unknown to us is much greater than what we know. The Qur'ān does not attempt to enumerate them. It simply uses this touch to alert our hearts to this great divine show, which is presented before our very eyes and minds. Thus we go through our journey on earth reflecting and contemplating, deriving immense pleasure from looking carefully at this wonderful creature that lies within ourselves.

Furthermore, we gain much pleasure from looking carefully at people's faces, features, movements and habits, provided that such a look is cast through the eyes of one who acknowledges his position as a servant of God, taking a round in an exhibition of the greatest Creator's work. How about one who spends a lifetime in such pleasant exercise? With a pointer like this, the Qur'ān creates man anew, giving him a new faculty of perception, a new pleasant life and an enjoyment that is unparalleled by anything else on earth.

It is this level of reflection and contemplation that the Qur'ān wants us to achieve. Faith is what gives our hearts such a treasure and opens for us this superior enjoyment while we are still here on earth.

An Oath to Confirm the Truth

After the two exhibitions of the earth and man, the *sūrah* presents a third from the world above, where our perceptions cannot reach. It is there that our shares of provisions and livelihood are determined: "*And in the sky is your sustenance and all that you are promised.*" (Verse 22)

This is a remarkable touch. The means of livelihood and provisions are all on earth. Man works hard and expects to receive his share as a result of his work. The Qur'ān, however, turns man's attention to the sky, to heaven, to God. It is there that shares are determined. The earth itself, and all its means of provisions, are signs for those who have certainty

of faith, pointing to God so that we ask Him for His bounty. Thus do we get rid of worldly burdens, personal greed and the immediate means of income so that these do not become a barrier preventing us from looking up to God who has created all such means.

Every believer understands this statement properly, realizing that it does not mean that one should abandon one's livelihood. He knows that God has assigned to man the task of building life on earth. He understands that it means that man must not make it the focus of his attention. He should work on earth whilst looking up to heaven. He should use the means of his livelihood, realizing that they are not what brings him his provisions. These provisions are assigned to him in heaven, and what God has promised is certain to be fulfilled. Thus his heart breaks the shackles of the immediate concerns about his livelihood, finding in them signs pointing to their Creator. Man thus revives his bond with heaven while standing firmly on the earth. This is what God wants for man, whom He created from clay, then breathed in him of His own spirit, to make him nobler than most of His creation. Faith is the means that puts man in the best situation, because it returns him to that state of pure nature God gave him, before it was affected by deviation and corruption.

Having touched on these three great signs: the earth, man and heaven, God states an oath by Himself, in His glory, that all this discourse is absolutely true: "*By the Lord of the heavens and the earth, all this is the very truth, just as true as you are endowed with speech.*" (Verse 23) That humans speak is a fact they acknowledge. They entertain no doubt whatsoever about it. Likewise, this discourse is absolutely true. God tells only the absolute truth.

Al-Aṣma'ī, a famous literary figure who lived in the later part of the second century of the Islamic calendar, reports the following anecdote which is quoted by al-Zamakhsharī in his commentary on the Qur'ān, *Al-Kashshāf.* We quote it here as it is interesting and relevant to our discussion.

> I came out of the main mosque in Basrah and I saw a Bedouin riding a young camel. He asked me to which tribe I belonged, and I told him that I was from Asma'. He asked where I had come from

and I said, 'From a place where the words of the Lord of Grace are recited.' He said: 'Then recite to me.' I began reading the *sūrah* entitled 'The Scattering Winds'. When I read the verse saying, "*And in the sky is your sustenance and all that you are promised,*" he said, 'This is enough.' He immediately slaughtered his she-camel and distributed its meat to all the people around, then he broke his sword and bow, and left. When I subsequently went on pilgrimage with Caliph al-Rashīd and as I was doing *ṭawāf* around the Ka'bah, I heard someone with a sharp voice calling me. I looked around and I saw the Bedouin having grown thinner and paler. He greeted me and asked me to recite to him the same *sūrah* again. When I reached the same verse, he said, 'We have found God's promise to be true.' Then he asked me what came after that verse. I read the next verse, "*By the Lord of the heavens and the earth, all this is the very truth, just as true as you are endowed with speech.*" He cried aloud, 'Limitless is God in His glory! Who has angered the Almighty to make Him swear? They would not believe His words so that He would say an oath!' He repeated this three times and then passed away.[2]

This may or may not be a true story, but it reminds us that this oath by God is awesome. It is an oath by God Himself and by His main attribute, 'the Lord of the heavens and earth', which adds to the certainty of the truth that is the subject of this oath. It is true, and it does not need an oath to make it so.

Abraham and the Angels

So far we have looked at the first part of the *sūrah*. The second part includes brief references to the stories of Abraham, Lot, Moses, the 'Ād Prophet Hud's people, the Thamūd Prophet Ṣāliḥ's people, and Noah's people. This part closely relates to what preceded it in the *sūrah* and to what follows.

Have you heard the story of Abraham's honoured guests? They went in to see him and bade him peace. He answered, 'Peace,' [and added

2. Al-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf*, Dār al-Fikr, (n.d.), Vol. 4, p. 17.

to himself] 'These are strangers.' He turned quickly to his household and brought out a fat calf. He placed it before them, saying: 'Will you not eat?' He then became apprehensive of them, but they said: 'Do not be afraid.' They gave him the good news of [the birth of] a son who would be endowed with knowledge. His wife then came in with a loud cry, struck her face, and said: 'A barren old woman!' Replied they: 'Thus will it be. This is what your Lord said. He is the Wise, the All-Knowing.' Said Abraham: 'What is your errand, messengers?' They replied: 'We have been sent to a people lost in sin, to bring down on them stones of clay, marked as from your Lord for those who transgressed all bounds. We brought out such believers as were there; but We did not find there any who had surrendered themselves to Us apart from a single house. We left there a sign for those who fear the grievous suffering. (Verses 24–37)

These verses speak of a sign or signs in the history of the divine message, just like those signs in the earth and in man to which the *sūrah* referred. It also refers to a promise or promises that are fulfilled, just like the promises the *sūrah* mentioned earlier.

It begins its reference to Abraham by the question: "*Have you heard the story of Abraham's honoured guests?*" (Verse 24) This style is used to prepare our minds for what comes next. It describes Abraham's guests as '*honoured*', either because they are so in God's sight, or because of how Abraham paid honour to them as we soon learn. Abraham's hospitality appears very clearly from the first moment his guests arrived. Once they greeted him and received his reply, and despite the fact that they are total strangers, he immediately goes to his wife telling her to prepare food. He provides a large quantity of food, sufficient for scores of people: "*He turned quickly to his household and brought out a fat calf.*" (Verse 26) According to some reports, there were only three guests, which means that a shoulder of that calf would have been sufficient to give them a good meal.

"*He placed it before them, saying: 'Will you not eat?'*" (Verse 27) He asked this question after he saw that their hands did not touch the food and it looked as if they would not eat the meal that had been provided.

"*He then became apprehensive of them,*" either because a stranger who refuses to eat his host's food appears treacherous and causes an element of apprehension, or because he noticed something odd about them. Therefore, they revealed their identity, reassuring him and giving him the good news they had brought him: "*They said: 'Do not be afraid.' They gave him the good news of [the birth of] a son who would be endowed with knowledge.*" (Verse 28) This was the happy news of Isaac's birth.

"*His wife then came in with a loud cry, struck her face, and said: 'A barren old woman!'*" (Verse 29) She overheard the good news, was stunned and surprised. She could not stop herself from crying out in amazement. In the habitual reaction of women, she slapped herself on both cheeks and said: '*A barren old woman!*' This was a further expression of her surprise given she was elderly, and had been barren throughout her life. Stunned by this totally unexpected piece of news, she forgot that those bringing the good news were angels. Therefore, the angels reminded her of the basic truth that there is no limit to God's power, and that He determines everything on the basis of perfect wisdom and absolute knowledge: "*Replied they: 'Thus will it be. This is what your Lord said. He is the Wise, the All-Knowing.'*" (Verse 30)

Everything will come into existence once the command, 'Be', is given. God said it, so what can prevent His order from being fulfilled? Familiar habits limit our imagination and understanding. Therefore, we are surprised when we see something running counter to what is familiar. Yet God's will is free, unrestricted by anything that may be familiar to man in his small world. It creates whatever He wills, without limitation.

When Abraham realized who his guests were, he asked them about the mission they had been sent to accomplish: "*Said Abraham: 'What is your errand, messengers?' They replied: 'We have been sent to a people lost in sin.*" (Verses 31–32) These were Lot's people as explained in other *sūrahs*. Those angels would "*bring down on them stones of clay, marked as from your Lord for those who transgressed all bounds.*" (Verses 33–34)

These stones of clay, marked or made ready by God for those who transgress the bounds, like Lot's people who transgressed the bounds of human nature, truth and religion, may well be stones from a volcanic eruption brought out from deep inside the earth. In this respect, they

are '*from your Lord,*' aimed, in accordance with His will and the laws He sets in operation, against any transgressors He has marked. Thus, they are determined in time and place according to His absolute knowledge and His will. There is nothing to prevent their being aimed, within the framework of His will and laws, by angels. Do we know the exact nature of God's angels? Do we know the nature of their relation to the universe and its inhabitants? Do we truly know the nature of the universal powers to which we give names according to what we may see of their characteristics? Why should we question the news given to us by God, saying that He sent some of these forces at a certain point of time, to aim some powers in a particular form, against certain people, at a certain place? How can we question such news when all our knowledge consists of some theories and supposed interpretations concerning what appears to us of these powers and forces? Their reality remains far removed from us. Let these stones be volcanic resulting from an eruption nearby, or some other such stones. What difference does it make? Both are the same in His hand, as He has made both and the secret is known to Him. He may reveal that secret when and if He so wishes.

"*We brought out such believers as were there,*" to protect and save them. "*But We did not find there any who had surrendered themselves to Us apart from a single house.*" (Verse 36) Those were Lot's family, as reported in other *sūrahs*, and they were all saved except his wife who perished with her people. "*We left there a sign for those who fear the grievous suffering.*" (Verse 37) Those who fear are the ones who see the sign, understand it and benefit from it. The others are blind, unable to see God's signs on earth, within themselves or in the events of history.

Moses and Earlier Communities

Another sign is cited from the history of Moses. A brief reference to this is made within the context of the signs from the history of God's messengers:

> *In Moses, too, there is a sign: We sent him to Pharaoh with clear authority; but Pharaoh turned away in the pride of his power and*

> *said [of Moses]: 'He is but a sorcerer, or maybe a madman.' We seized him and his hosts, and cast them all into the sea: he was the one to blame.* (Verses 38–40)

The clear authority God gave to Moses was his powerful argument and irrefutable proof, as well as that people were in awe of his presence. Yet Pharaoh turned away, proud of his power, and rejected the clear truth and the decisive proof. When Moses showed him the miraculous signs God had given him, Pharaoh said that Moses was '*a sorcerer or a madman*'. This confirms that miracles will not guide a heart that is not prepared to believe. They cannot silence a voice that insists on repeating fabrications.

The *sūrah* does not give details of Moses' story. It proceeds straight to its conclusion: "*We seized him and his hosts, and cast them all into the sea: he was the one to blame.*" (Verse 40) Pharaoh certainly deserved all blame because of his transgression and rejection of God's message. The phraseology here clearly indicates God's direct action in seizing Pharaoh and his army and casting them into the sea. This is deliberately highlighted as it fits with the exhibition of God's signs on earth, in man and throughout history.

> *In the 'Ād there is another sign: We let loose against them a life-destroying wind which reduced to dust everything it came upon.* (Verses 41–42)

The wind is described in Arabic as *'aqīm*, which literally means 'sterile'. It is given this description because, unlike what they expected, it did not bring them water and life. Rather, it destroyed life and brought about death and total destruction. It left everything it came upon like a dead thing, reduced to dust.

Wind is one of the forces God has set in the universe, and one of God's troops which are known only to Him. He sends it, in accordance with His will and the laws He sets in operation, in a particular form, at an appointed time, bringing either destruction or life to whomever He wills. In such a situation there is no room for the naïve objection

voiced by some people who say that the wind blows according to a universal system and travels here or there as other natural forces and factors determine. The One who makes it blow and travel according to a certain system, forces and factors is the One who sends it against whom He wills at the time He chooses. He is able to send it as He wills within the system and factors He has put in place. No doubt or objection can be voiced.

> *And in Thamūd, too, when they were told: 'You can enjoy your life for a while,' but they insolently defied their Lord's commandment. So, the thunderbolt struck them while they were helplessly looking on. They were unable even to rise; nor could they defend themselves.* (Verses 43–45)

The statement referring to what was said to them, "*You can enjoy your life for a while,*" may be a reference to their being given a period of three days after they killed the she-camel, which was a sign given to them by God. This is mentioned in another *sūrah*, when their prophet, Ṣāliḥ, said to them: "*You have just three more days to enjoy life in your homes.*" (11: 65) It could also refer to the fact that they had their time of life and enjoyed it from the time the divine message was given to them to the time when they slew the she-camel. They clearly disobeyed God and deserved His punishment.

What was said about the stones aimed at Lot's people and the wind sent against the 'Ād is also applicable to the thunderbolt that struck the Thamūd. All of these are universal forces that work in accordance with God's will and His laws. He sends them against whomever He decides within these laws and they fulfil the role assigned to them by God like any of His other troops.

"*And the people of Noah before them: they too were people lost in evil.*" (Verse 46) This is just a quick reference, with no details or explanations. It is added as if to say, 'remember Noah's people.' This reference is followed by one to the skies and how they are built. Both are among God's signs, one from the universe and one from history. The *sūrah* puts them together, so joining its second and third parts.

Creatures in Pairs

> *We built the skies with power; and We gave it a vast expanse; and We spread out the earth: how well have We prepared it! All things We have created in pairs, so that you may take thought. Flee, then, to God! I am sent by Him to give you clear warning; and do not associate partners with Him: I am sent by Him to give you clear warning!* (Verses 47–51)

These verses take us back to the great universal exhibition the *sūrah* presented in its opening, providing here yet another image the Qur'ān puts before our eyes and minds. Further references are added to God's signs, linking that provided by Noah and his people with that of the heavens, the earth and other creatures. This culminates with a call to mankind to flee to their Lord, submitting themselves to Him and associating no partners with Him.

"*We built the skies with power; and We gave it a vast expanse.*" (Verse 47) Power is the clearest element in the solid, firm and well-coordinated structure of the '*skies*', whatever we take the term to mean: the orbits of the different stars and planets, any of the star clusters we normally call a galaxy which includes many millions of stars, a stratum of the huge space in which planets and stars are scattered, or any other of its many meanings. Vastness is another clearly recognizable element. These millions of huge stars are no more than small particles floating in the great expanse that is the universe.

This reference to the skies may also imply a pointer to the stores of sustenance, which were stated earlier in the *sūrah* to be in the sky. However, in the earlier reference it is merely a symbol indicating what is with God. Yet the Qur'ānic expression gives deliberate connotations so as to leave a clear impression on people's minds.

The same applies to the reference to the earth and its being spread out: "*And We spread out the earth: how well have We prepared it!*" (Verse 48) As we explained before, God has made this earth to be a cradle for human life. That the earth has been spread out indicates that it serves as a cradle equipped with all that is necessary to support and enable life to flourish.

"*All things We have created in pairs, so that you may take thought.*" (Verse 49) This is a fascinating truth that reveals the basic rule common to all creation on earth, and possibly in the universe. As it stands, the statement does not limit the '*in pairs*' rule to the earth. It is clearly seen among living creatures, but the phrase, '*all things*', also includes inanimate objects. Hence, the statement means that both animate and inanimate things are created in pairs.

This statement was presented to people 14 centuries ago, when even the thought that living things, let alone inanimate objects, are all made in pairs was totally unknown. When we remember this we find the statement itself becomes amazing, as it presents such a universal fact to people at such an early time. Moreover, this statement confirms that recent scientific research is heading towards confirmation of this truth. Indeed, it has almost established that the whole universe is made of atoms, which contain a dual electric charge, positive and negative.[3]

These verses referring to the great universe, the width of the earth and the system of creation all culminate in a call on people to flee to God, the Creator of all, shedding all that shackles their souls, acknowledging His absolute unity: "*Flee, then, to God! I am sent by Him to give you clear warning; and do not associate partners with Him: I am sent by Him to give you clear warning!*" (Verses 50–51) Use of the word *flee*, here is very significant. It points to the burdens, shackles and handcuffs that restrain people, pulling them towards the earth and its material life, preventing free movement and ensuring they are always restrained. Most cogent among these are the restraints of earning one's livelihood, maintaining one's income and preoccupation with improving one's lot. Therefore, the call to shed all these and flee to God, alone, without partners, is very powerful. It reminds people, twice in succession, that they have no excuse for not doing so: "*I am sent by Him to give you clear warning.*" (Verses 50–51)

It is as if the mention of the signs seen everywhere in the heavens, earth and among creatures is a continuation of the signs given to God's

3. The author wrote this in the late 1950s. Recent scientific research has moved further, looking at sub-atomic particles, the string theory, etc. These again confirm what is stated here that every thing is created in pairs. God certainly tells the truth. – Editor's note.

messengers. Next we have a comment on the references to earlier messengers mentioned in the *sūrah*:

> *Thus whenever a messenger came to those that lived before them, they also said: 'He is but a sorcerer, or maybe a madman.' Have they, perchance, handed down this legacy to one another? No! They are people who transgress all bounds. Turn, then, away from them: you shall incur no blame; and go on reminding all. Such a reminder will benefit those who believe.* (Verses 52–55)

It is the same nature common to all unbelievers. They all give the same response to the divine message: "*Thus whenever a messenger came to those that lived before them, they also said: 'He is but a sorcerer, or maybe a madman.'*" (Verse 52) This is exactly what the Arab unbelievers said. It is as if one generation of unbelievers handed down such a legacy to the next in a continuing process. Needless to say, there was no such handing down. It is all in the nature of transgression and unbelief whereby present unbelievers and their predecessors are brought together.

The natural result of this repeated stand is that the Prophet should not pay any attention to what the unbelievers say. He is not responsible for them as they choose to remain in error. He has spared no effort in trying to get them to follow divine guidance: "*Turn, then, away from them: you shall incur no blame.*" (Verse 54) His only task is to remind people and to continue to give them reminders, no matter how persistent they are in their rejection of the truth: "*And go on reminding all. Such a reminder will benefit those who believe.*" (Verse 55) Such reminders will not benefit hardened unbelievers. Yet the task assigned to God's messengers is to give such reminders. It is not within their ability to ensure that people follow proper guidance. That is outside their remit. It is God alone who gives guidance.

The Purpose of Creation

The last note in the *sūrah* explains the meaning of fleeing to God and shedding all burdens and encumbrances in order to fulfil the mission for which He created people:

> *I have not created the* jinn *and mankind to any end other than they may worship Me. No sustenance do I require of them, nor do I require that they should feed Me. God is indeed the Provider of all sustenance, the Lord of Power, the Ever Mighty.* (Verses 56–58)

This short statement embodies one of the greatest universal truths. Indeed, to fully understand this truth it is necessary for human life on earth to be set on the right track. This applies in equal measure to the life of the individual, the community and all humanity throughout history. Understanding this truth opens up a whole host of concepts and meanings. The first point in this truth is that there is a clear objective for the existence of humans and *jinn* on earth. This objective is represented in a task: whoever fulfils it achieves the objective of his existence, and whoever neglects it leads a life without purpose or objective. He who neglects it thus breaks away from the law that applied to him when he came into existence, and he ends in utter loss. This task which binds humans and *jinn* to the law of the universe is worship or servitude to God. Thus, there will be a servant who worships and a Lord who is worshipped. Man's life is thus set aright on this basis.

We then begin to see the other side of this great truth, realizing that the concept of worship must be much broader and more comprehensive than attending to worship rituals. Neither humans nor *jinn* spend their lives in worship rituals. Indeed, God does not require them to do so. On the contrary, He requires them to fulfil other tasks which take up most of their time. We do not know anything about the sort of duties God requires of the *jinn*, but we know the extent of what God requires of man. This is clearly stated in the Qur'ān, as God says: "*Your Lord said to the angels, 'I am appointing a vicegerent on earth.'*" (2: 30) Being in charge of the earth is then the main function of human beings. This requires the exercise of different activities and the use of different talents in order to build human life on earth, after getting to know its resources and potentials. In doing so, man puts in effect God's will to use and develop the earth so as to ensure steady progress. Man's vicegerency also involves the implementation of God's law so that human society can be set on the proper foundation, one that is in harmony with the law governing the universe.

All this makes it absolutely clear that worship, which is the objective of human existence, or rather man's first duty, has a much broader sense than the mere observance of rituals. Indeed the entire concept of vicegerency is incorporated into the idea of worship, which must be reflected in two major ways. The first is that the concept of man's servitude to God should be well established in our hearts. This so that we fully realize that there is only a servant who worships and a Lord who is worshipped. Beyond this there is nothing: it is just the One Lord and all others are His servants, to whom they offer their worship. The second is that every thought, every action and every life affair must be addressed purely to God, seeking His acceptance. Every feeling other than that of submission to God and worshipping Him should be discarded.

When these two concepts are fully absorbed, the meaning of worship is fully realized. Thus, ordinary actions in man's life become like worship rituals; rituals like building human life on earth, striving for God's cause, ensuring patience in adversity and accepting God's will are all aspects of worship, fulfilling the main objective for which humans and *jinn* have been created. They are all a translation of submission to the overall law that governs the universe, which is submission and servitude to God, and to no one else.

Thus man will live on earth feeling that he is there to fulfil a task assigned to him by God, for a period of time. This task is to obey God and worship Him, without having any interest or objective in all this other than obedience of God. The reward for such obedience man finds within himself in the form of pleasant reassurance and satisfaction with his lot, as well as deep gratification from earning God's acceptance. He will then find greater reward in the life to come where he will receive honour and far-reaching blessings.

He will then have truly fled to God, discarding all worldly burdens, attractions and distractions and claimed his full freedom. He will have established his position in the general system of the universe as a servant of God who created him for His worship. He will have fulfilled the purpose of his existence. As we have said: an essential requirement of worship, in its proper and full sense, is that man should fulfil the duties of his position that places him in charge of the earth. He should achieve the best results he can in discharging his duties, while at the same

time look for no personal benefit. No worldly attraction should tempt him to change course. What he must realize is that when he fulfils his mission of building human life on earth, to the best standard he can, he is not doing so for himself or his position; he is doing it in order to put into effect the concept of worship and to flee to God from all worldly burdens and attractions.

A correlative of this is that man should evaluate deeds and actions on the basis of their motives, not their results. Let the outcome be as it may, man should not concern himself with it. He is only concerned with fulfilling his duty of worship when he does anything. His reward is not based on the outcome of his actions, but on the worship he fulfils in performing them.

This means that man's attitude to duties, responsibilities and actions will totally change. He will look only to the worship aspect involved in them all. When he fulfils this aspect, his objective is met, let the outcome be what it may. The outcome is not part of his responsibility. It is determined by God's will. Man himself, his efforts, intentions and actions are part of God's will.

When man offloads any concern about the outcome of his efforts and feels that his reward is guaranteed, as long as his motive for action fulfils the concept of worship, his heart will be free of the sort of aspirations that make people compete and quarrel over life's prizes. On the one side, he exerts his best efforts to fulfil his mission and discharge his duties on earth, and, on the other, he looks for no gain as a result of his efforts. What he achieves is solely to fulfil the concept of worship, not to make any personal gain.

The Qur'ān strengthens this feeling, letting man overcome his concerns about his livelihood and his selfish desires. Everybody's livelihood is guaranteed by God. Needless to say, He needs neither sustenance nor food from them when He asks them to spend some of their money on those who are in need: "*No sustenance do I require of them, nor do I require that they should feed Me. God is indeed the Provider of all sustenance, the Lord of Power, the Ever Mighty.*" (Verses 57–58) What this means in effect is that a believer's incentive to work and exert his best efforts in discharging his duties of building human life on earth is not to earn a livelihood; his incentive is to fulfil the meaning of worship,

which requires him to exert his best efforts. Thus his mind is focused on the fulfilment of the worship concept in doing whatever he is doing. He is free of concerns about the results of this effort. These are, then, noble feelings, which can only exist within such a noble concept.

It is true that humanity does not understand or appreciate these feelings. This is because humanity has not lived with the guidance of the Qur'ān, as the first generation of Muslims did, nor has it derived its life value from the Islamic constitution.

When man rises to this sublime level of worship, or servitude to God, and maintains it, he will disdain any resort to foul means in order to achieve a noble end, even when this end is none other than to achieve victory for God's message. Foul means will, for one thing, destroy the noble meaning of worship. For another, a believer is not concerned with achieving goals. He is only concerned with the fulfilment of his duty. Goals and ends are left to God to determine in accordance with His will.

Moreover, a servant of God who attends to his worship in this way will enjoy ease of conscience, reassurance and a happy state in all situations, whether he sees the outcome of his efforts or not, and whether they bring the results he hoped for or not. He has done his duty and made sure of his reward once he has fulfilled the concept of worship in his work. The outcome is outside his remit. He knows that he is a servant of God. Therefore, in his feelings and appeals, he does not exceed the limits of a servant. He knows that God is the Lord. Therefore, he does not encroach on what belongs to the Lord. He thus earns God's acceptance and He is happy with what God gives him.

Thus do we understand some aspects of this great truth stated in a single short verse: "*I have not created the* jinn *and mankind to any end other than they may worship Me.*" (Verse 56) This truth is great indeed; it can change how people live when it takes hold of their hearts.

In the light of this great truth, the *sūrah* concludes with a warning to the wrongdoers who hasten the fulfilment of God's warnings: "*The wrongdoers shall have their share [of evil] like their predecessors. Let them not ask Me to hasten it. Woe betide the unbelievers on the day they have been promised.*" (Verses 59–60)

SŪRAH 52

Al-Ṭūr

(Mount Sinai)

Prologue

This *sūrah* constitutes a profound and effective address to the human heart. It aims to eradicate doubts, misrepresentations and false assumptions that may linger in some corners of the human mind. It refutes every argument or excuse to justify deviation from the path of faith. It seeks to do this with an irresistible onslaught, one that inevitably forces submission. In order to achieve this, the *sūrah* employs all aspects of the Qur'ānic discourse including choice vocabulary, connotations, images, musical notes and beats. From start to finish, its verses flow like missiles fired in quick succession, its beats like thunderbolts and its images like a running, captivating film that does not stop for even a moment.

The *sūrah* begins with God's oath by some sacred things in the heavens and earth, some of which are well known and others that belong to the realm that lies beyond human perception: "*By Mount Sinai; by a scripture inscribed on unrolled parchment; by the much-visited House; by the vault raised high; by the swelling sea.*" (Verses 1–6) This oath confirms something really awesome and it fills its listeners with terror. It is expressed in words that most suit its feared outcome, painting an image that leaves the heart shuddering: "*your Lord's punishment will indeed come to pass. Nothing can stop it. On the day when the sky will shake and reel, and the mountains will move away.*" (Verses 7–10) As we visualize this

scene, we see and hear the horror that causes violent shaking, coupled with a well-deserved rebuke: "*Woe on that day to those who deny the truth, who idly play with vain trifles. On that day they will be irresistibly thrust into the fire of hell, [and told:] 'This is the fire you used to deny! So is this sorcery, or do you not see? Burn in it! It will be the same whether you bear it with or without patience. You are being requited for what you have done.*" (Verses 11–16)

This represents the first part of the *sūrah*. It is immediately followed by a change of tone and colour. The *sūrah* now aims to hold before the very hearts and minds that saw the foregoing horror the prospect of safety and bliss. It depicts a scene of those who are God-fearing and the reward prepared for them. This is shown at ease, dwelling on pleasant details. It thus takes us from an air of punishment and suffering to one of happiness and enjoyment: "*The believers will be in gardens and in bliss, rejoicing in all that their Lord will have granted them; for their Lord will have warded off from them the suffering of the blazing fire. 'Eat and drink with healthy enjoyment as a reward for what you have done.' They will recline on couches arranged in rows, and We shall pair them with companions having most beautiful eyes. As for the believers whose offspring follow them in faith, We shall unite them with their offspring; and We shall not deny them anything of the reward for their deeds. Yet every individual will be held in pledge for his own deeds. We provide them with fruit and meat as they desire. They pass around a cup which will not lead to idle talk or to sin. They will be waited upon by youths of their own, [as pure] as pearls hidden in their shells. They will turn to one another, asking each other. They will say: 'When we were still living with our kinsfolk, we were full of fear, and so God has been gracious to us, and warded off from us suffering through the scorching wind. We used to pray to Him: He is the Beneficent, the Ever Merciful.'*" (Verses 17–28)

In its third part the *sūrah* seeks to refute all doubts, misconceptions, excuses and false arguments. It presents the truth as simple, clear and powerful, and speaks with an irrefutable logic that allows no room for evasion. It holds out the truth forcing people to its acknowledgement and acceptance. This part begins by telling the Prophet to continue with his reminders to people, despite their ill treatment of him and his Companions. He should confront them with his overpowering logic:

"So, [Prophet,] remind people. By the grace of your Lord, you are neither a soothsayer nor a madman. Or do they say, 'He is but a poet; let us await whatever misfortune time will bring him.' Say: 'Wait if you will. I too am waiting.' Is it their reason that prompts them to take this attitude; or are they simply arrogant people? Or do they say, 'He has fabricated it himself?' They certainly do not believe. Let them, then, produce a discourse like it, if what they say is true. Were they created out of nothing? Were they the creators? Did they create the heavens and the earth? No. They have no faith. Do they possess your Lord's treasures? Or are they in ultimate control? Or have they a ladder to climb, in order to eavesdrop [on heaven's secrets]? Let their eavesdropper produce a clear proof. Is He to have only daughters and you sons? Do you [Prophet] demand a payment from them that would be burdened with debt? Do they have knowledge of the hidden reality so that they can write it down? Or do they want to entrap you? It is the unbelievers who are truly entrapped. Have they, then, any deity other than God? Exalted is God far above anything they associate with Him." (Verses 29–43)

This list of questions comes in quick succession, like thundering missiles that blow falsehood into smithereens, and silence every stubborn argument that tries to defy the truth. The *sūrah* portrays the unbelievers' stubbornness showing how they defy the truth in the face of every tangible reality: *"Even if they see a part of the sky falling down, they would say, 'It is but a mass of clouds!'"* (Verse 44) Needless to say, there is a huge difference between a portion of sky falling and clouds moving *en masse*. Yet still they try to justify themselves. Hence, the *sūrah* aims its final missile at them, threatening them with the prospect of hell that is promised at the beginning: *"Leave them, then, until they face the day when they will be thunderstruck; the day when none of their scheming will be of any avail to them, when they will receive no support."* (Verses 45–46) It then threatens them with a punishment that overtakes them before that promised day: *"Closer at hand more suffering awaits the wrongdoers, but most of them are not aware of it."* (Verse 47)

The *sūrah* concludes on a happy note addressed to the Prophet whom they used to describe as a poet whose death they would await, or as a soothsayer or a madman. This happy ending is given so as to comfort and assure him of his position of honour. Indeed, this happy note has no parallel in the Qur'ān, and it was never previously addressed to any

other prophet or messenger: "*So, await in patience your Lord's judgement; for you are under Our watchful eyes. Extol your Lord's limitless glory and praise when you rise, and extol His glory at night, and at the time when the stars retreat.*" (Verses 48–49) This is a note of kindness that ensures that all the troubles the Prophet met with would not have the least effect on him.

Al-Ṭūr (Mount Sinai)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful	بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ
By Mount Sinai; (1)	وَٱلطُّورِ ﴿١﴾
by a scripture inscribed (2)	وَكِتَٰبٍ مَّسْطُورٍ ﴿٢﴾
on unrolled parchment; (3)	فِى رَقٍّ مَّنشُورٍ ﴿٣﴾
by the much-visited House; (4)	وَٱلْبَيْتِ ٱلْمَعْمُورِ ﴿٤﴾
by the vault raised high; (5)	وَٱلسَّقْفِ ٱلْمَرْفُوعِ ﴿٥﴾
by the swelling sea; (6)	وَٱلْبَحْرِ ٱلْمَسْجُورِ ﴿٦﴾
your Lord's punishment will indeed come to pass. (7)	إِنَّ عَذَابَ رَبِّكَ لَوَٰقِعٌ ﴿٧﴾
Nothing can stop it. (8)	مَّا لَهُۥ مِن دَافِعٍ ﴿٨﴾
On the day when the sky will shake and reel, (9)	يَوْمَ تَمُورُ ٱلسَّمَآءُ مَوْرًا ﴿٩﴾
and the mountains will move away. (10)	وَتَسِيرُ ٱلْجِبَالُ سَيْرًا ﴿١٠﴾

Woe on that day to those who deny the truth, (11)

فَوَيۡلٞ يَوۡمَئِذٖ لِّلۡمُكَذِّبِينَ (١١)

who idly play with vain trifles. (12)

ٱلَّذِينَ هُمۡ فِي خَوۡضٖ يَلۡعَبُونَ (١٢)

On that day they will be irresistibly thrust into the fire of hell, (13)

يَوۡمَ يُدَعُّونَ إِلَىٰ نَارِ جَهَنَّمَ دَعًّا (١٣)

[and told:] 'This is the fire you used to deny! (14)

هَٰذِهِ ٱلنَّارُ ٱلَّتِي كُنتُم بِهَا تُكَذِّبُونَ (١٤)

So is this sorcery, or do you not see? (15)

أَفَسِحۡرٌ هَٰذَآ أَمۡ أَنتُمۡ لَا تُبۡصِرُونَ (١٥)

Burn in it! It will be the same whether you bear it with or without patience. You are being requited for what you have done.' (16)

ٱصۡلَوۡهَا فَٱصۡبِرُوٓاْ أَوۡ لَا تَصۡبِرُواْ سَوَآءٌ عَلَيۡكُمۡۖ إِنَّمَا تُجۡزَوۡنَ مَا كُنتُمۡ تَعۡمَلُونَ (١٦)

The believers will be in gardens and in bliss, (17)

إِنَّ ٱلۡمُتَّقِينَ فِي جَنَّٰتٖ وَنَعِيمٖ (١٧)

rejoicing in all that their Lord will have granted them; for their Lord will have warded off from them the suffering of the blazing fire. (18)

فَٰكِهِينَ بِمَآ ءَاتَىٰهُمۡ رَبُّهُمۡ وَوَقَىٰهُمۡ رَبُّهُمۡ عَذَابَ ٱلۡجَحِيمِ (١٨)

'Eat and drink with healthy enjoyment as a reward for what you have done.' (19)

كُلُواْ وَٱشۡرَبُواْ هَنِيٓـَٔۢا بِمَا كُنتُمۡ تَعۡمَلُونَ (١٩)

They will recline on couches arranged in rows, and We shall pair them with companions having most beautiful eyes. (20)

مُتَّكِـِٔينَ عَلَىٰ سُرُرٍ مَّصْفُوفَةٍ وَزَوَّجْنَٰهُم بِحُورٍ عِينٍ ﴿٢٠﴾

As for the believers whose offspring follow them in faith, We shall unite them with their offspring; and We shall not deny them anything of the reward for their deeds. Yet every individual will be held in pledge for his own deeds. (21)

وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَٱتَّبَعَتْهُمْ ذُرِّيَّتُهُم بِإِيمَٰنٍ أَلْحَقْنَا بِهِمْ ذُرِّيَّتَهُمْ وَمَآ أَلَتْنَٰهُم مِّنْ عَمَلِهِم مِّن شَىْءٍ كُلُّ ٱمْرِئٍۭ بِمَا كَسَبَ رَهِينٌ ﴿٢١﴾

We provide them with fruit and meat as they desire. (22)

وَأَمْدَدْنَٰهُم بِفَٰكِهَةٍ وَلَحْمٍ مِّمَّا يَشْتَهُونَ ﴿٢٢﴾

They pass around a cup which will not lead to idle talk or to sin. (23)

يَتَنَٰزَعُونَ فِيهَا كَأْسًا لَّا لَغْوٌ فِيهَا وَلَا تَأْثِيمٌ ﴿٢٣﴾

They will be waited upon by youths of their own, [as pure] as pearls hidden in their shells. (24)

وَيَطُوفُ عَلَيْهِمْ غِلْمَانٌ لَّهُمْ كَأَنَّهُمْ لُؤْلُؤٌ مَّكْنُونٌ ﴿٢٤﴾

They will turn to one another, asking each other. (25)

وَأَقْبَلَ بَعْضُهُمْ عَلَىٰ بَعْضٍ يَتَسَآءَلُونَ ﴿٢٥﴾

They will say: 'When we were still living with our kinsfolk, we were full of fear, (26)

قَالُوٓا۟ إِنَّا كُنَّا قَبْلُ فِىٓ أَهْلِنَا مُشْفِقِينَ ﴿٢٦﴾

فَمَنَّ ٱللَّهُ عَلَيۡنَا وَوَقَىٰنَا عَذَابَ ٱلسَّمُومِ ﴿٢٧﴾

and so God has been gracious to us, and warded off from us suffering through the scorching wind. (27)

إِنَّا كُنَّا مِن قَبۡلُ نَدۡعُوهُۖ إِنَّهُۥ هُوَ ٱلۡبَرُّ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ﴿٢٨﴾

We used to pray to Him: He is the Beneficent, the Ever Merciful.' (28)

فَذَكِّرۡ فَمَآ أَنتَ بِنِعۡمَتِ رَبِّكَ بِكَاهِنٖ وَلَا مَجۡنُونٍ ﴿٢٩﴾

So, [Prophet,] remind people. By the grace of your Lord, you are neither a soothsayer nor a madman. (29)

أَمۡ يَقُولُونَ شَاعِرٞ نَّتَرَبَّصُ بِهِۦ رَيۡبَ ٱلۡمَنُونِ ﴿٣٠﴾

Or do they say, 'He is but a poet; let us await whatever misfortune time will bring him.' (30)

قُلۡ تَرَبَّصُواْ فَإِنِّي مَعَكُم مِّنَ ٱلۡمُتَرَبِّصِينَ ﴿٣١﴾

Say: 'Wait if you will. I too am waiting.' (31)

أَمۡ تَأۡمُرُهُمۡ أَحۡلَٰمُهُم بِهَٰذَآۚ أَمۡ هُمۡ قَوۡمٞ طَاغُونَ ﴿٣٢﴾

Is it their reason that prompts them to take this attitude; or are they simply arrogant people? (32)

أَمۡ يَقُولُونَ تَقَوَّلَهُۥۚ بَل لَّا يُؤۡمِنُونَ ﴿٣٣﴾

Or do they say, 'He has fabricated it himself?' They certainly do not believe. (33)

فَلۡيَأۡتُواْ بِحَدِيثٖ مِّثۡلِهِۦٓ إِن كَانُواْ صَٰدِقِينَ ﴿٣٤﴾

Let them, then, produce a discourse like it, if what they say is true. (34)

Were they created out of nothing? Were they the creators? (35)

أَمۡ خُلِقُواْ مِنۡ غَيۡرِ شَيۡءٍ أَمۡ هُمُ ٱلۡخَٰلِقُونَ ٣٥

Did they create the heavens and the earth? No. They have no faith. (36)

أَمۡ خَلَقُواْ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضَۚ بَل
لَّا يُوقِنُونَ ٣٦

Do they possess your Lord's treasures? Or are they in ultimate control? (37)

أَمۡ عِندَهُمۡ خَزَآئِنُ رَبِّكَ أَمۡ هُمُ
ٱلۡمُصَۜيۡطِرُونَ ٣٧

Or have they a ladder to climb, in order to eavesdrop [on heaven's secrets]? Let their eavesdropper produce a clear proof. (38)

أَمۡ لَهُمۡ سُلَّمٞ يَسۡتَمِعُونَ فِيهِۖ فَلۡيَأۡتِ مُسۡتَمِعُهُم
بِسُلۡطَٰنٖ مُّبِينٍ ٣٨

Is He to have only daughters and you sons? (39)

أَمۡ لَهُ ٱلۡبَنَٰتُ وَلَكُمُ ٱلۡبَنُونَ ٣٩

Do you [Prophet] demand a payment from them that would be burdened with debt? (40)

أَمۡ تَسۡـَٔلُهُمۡ أَجۡرٗا فَهُم مِّن مَّغۡرَمٖ مُّثۡقَلُونَ ٤٠

Do they have knowledge of the hidden reality so that they can write it down? (41)

أَمۡ عِندَهُمُ ٱلۡغَيۡبُ فَهُمۡ يَكۡتُبُونَ ٤١

Or do they want to entrap you? It is the unbelievers who are truly entrapped. (42)

أَمۡ يُرِيدُونَ كَيۡدٗاۖ فَٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ هُمُ
ٱلۡمَكِيدُونَ ٤٢

Have they, then, any deity other than God? Exalted is God far above anything they associate with Him. (43)

أَمۡ لَهُمۡ إِلَٰهٌ غَيۡرُ ٱللَّهِۚ سُبۡحَٰنَ ٱللَّهِ
عَمَّا يُشۡرِكُونَ ٤٣

Even if they see a part of the sky falling down, they would say, 'It is but a mass of clouds!' (44)

وَإِن يَرَوْا كِسْفًا مِّنَ السَّمَاءِ سَاقِطًا يَقُولُوا سَحَابٌ مَّرْكُومٌ ﴿٤٤﴾

Leave them, then, until they face the day when they will be thunderstruck; (45)

فَذَرْهُمْ حَتَّىٰ يُلَاقُوا يَوْمَهُمُ الَّذِي فِيهِ يُصْعَقُونَ ﴿٤٥﴾

the day when none of their scheming will be of any avail to them, when they will receive no support. (46)

يَوْمَ لَا يُغْنِي عَنْهُمْ كَيْدُهُمْ شَيْئًا وَلَا هُمْ يُنصَرُونَ ﴿٤٦﴾

Closer at hand more suffering awaits the wrongdoers, but most of them are not aware of it. (47)

وَإِنَّ لِلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا عَذَابًا دُونَ ذَٰلِكَ وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكْثَرَهُمْ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٤٧﴾

So, await in patience your Lord's judgement; for you are under Our watchful eyes. Extol your Lord's limitless glory and praise when you rise, (48)

وَاصْبِرْ لِحُكْمِ رَبِّكَ فَإِنَّكَ بِأَعْيُنِنَا ۖ وَسَبِّحْ بِحَمْدِ رَبِّكَ حِينَ تَقُومُ ﴿٤٨﴾

and extol His glory at night, and at the time when the stars retreat. (49)

وَمِنَ اللَّيْلِ فَسَبِّحْهُ وَإِدْبَارَ النُّجُومِ ﴿٤٩﴾

No Way Out

By Mount Sinai; by a scripture inscribed on unrolled parchment; by the much-visited House; by the vault raised high; by the swelling sea; your Lord's punishment will indeed come to pass. Nothing can stop it. On the day when the sky will shake and reel, and the mountains will

> *move away. Woe on that day to those who deny the truth, who idly play with vain trifles. On that day they will be irresistibly thrust into the fire of hell, [and told:] 'This is the fire you used to deny! So is this sorcery, or do you not see? Burn in it! It will be the same whether you bear it with or without patience. You are being requited for what you have done.* (Verses 1–16)

These short verses use varied rhyming endings and a measured cadence which they maintain. In the Arabic text, they begin with a verse with just one word. Then the verses combine two words, then add more words until we have the last verse in this section of 12 words, yet the same powerful note is maintained.

The first verse reads in Arabic as *Waṭ-Ṭūr*, translated here as *By Mount Sinai*. The Arabic word, *Ṭūr*, means a mountain with trees. Here, it most probably refers to the mountain mentioned in the Qur'ān, in Moses' story where he received the tablets. The overall ambience is one of sacred objects stated in an oath by God confirming that something momentous will certainly take place.

The scripture inscribed on unrolled parchment refers, most probably, to the book of Moses which was written for him on the tablets. This reading fits well with the mention of Mount Sinai in the first verse. However, some scholars say that the reference is to the 'imperishable tablet' in heaven, as this fits with what follows, referring to the *much-visited House* and the *vault raised high*. This again is a clearly possible meaning.

The *much-visited House* may refer to the Ka'bah although it is more likely that it refers to a house in heaven where the angels worship. An authentic *ḥadīth* giving details of the Prophet's night journey to heaven quotes him as saying: "Then I was taken up to the much-visited House. Seventy thousand enter it every day and they do not return to it. It is the last thing they have to do…" [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] The Prophet's statement means that the angels perform *ṭawāf* around this House, just as people do around the Ka'bah.

According to most scholars, the *vault raised high* refers to the sky. As he gave this explanation, Sufyān quoted the verse that says: "*We have set up the sky as a well-secured canopy.*" (21: 32)

The *swelling sea* means that it is full. This is the most appropriate thing to put together in a scene that depicts the sky. It is open, vast and full, which makes it a glorious and awesome sign that fits well with the other scenes making up the oath that confirms a great event. The adjective *masjūr*, translated here as swelling, may also mean set alight. In another *sūrah* we have a verse that says: "*When the seas are set alight.*" (81: 6) The phrase may also refer to some other creature.

God states an oath by these great creatures to confirm a great event. This opening makes us ready to receive it, fully aware that it is momentous: "*Your Lord's punishment will indeed come to pass. Nothing can stop it.*" (Verses 7–8) It is certain to happen. No one can stop it from happening. By their very sound, these two verses give the feeling that there is absolutely no question about its taking place. Furthermore, it overwhelms people: none can evade it. When a person receives this decisive note directly, without impediment, he feels its effect penetrate deep inside him. A report mentions that 'Umar went out one night to learn about people's conditions. As he passed by one house, he overheard someone reading this *sūrah* in prayer. When he read these two verses, he said: 'By God, the Lord of the Ka'bah, this is indeed a true oath.' He dismounted, leaned against a wall listening for a while. He then went home, feeling unwell. For a month, people continued to visit him, enquiring about his health, but no one knew his ailment.

'Umar knew this *sūrah*, having listened to it and read it many times before. Indeed, he listened to it as the Prophet used to read it in prayer. 'Umar was a learned person who was quick to appreciate such lessons. This time, however, his heart and feelings were ready recipients. Therefore, the message, powerful and focused as it is, was readily received by him, having a profound effect. It is as if 'Umar received these verses directly from their original source, just like the Prophet's heart did, but whereas the Prophet's heart was specially prepared to receive what God revealed to him, others do not have such abilities. Hence, when anyone experiences such a moment and receives some verses in this way, that person is bound to feel as 'Umar did.

These opening notes are followed by a fearful scene: "*On the day when the sky will shake and reel, and the mountains will move away.*" (Verses 9–10) We have here two images that leave us shaken, bewildered: the

sky that looks to us so firm and powerfully built is shaking and reeling, like high sea waves, and solid mountains slide away easily, lacking any firm base to stabilize them. It must be something extremely awesome that leaves the sky and the mountains in such chaos. So what will its effect on man be, a small and weak creature in the midst of a stupendous event?

Playing with Vain Trifles

In the midst of all this, the *sūrah* hurls on those who deny the truth of the divine message something more serious and frightening; namely, a prayer hastening their punishment by the Almighty: "*Woe on that day to those who deny the truth, who idly play with vain trifles.*" (Verses 11–12) Needless to say, a prayer by God means a sentence that is impossible to avoid, certain to come to pass, on that fearful day when the sky shakes and reels and the mountains slip away. All these terrible aspects thus confirm one another and overwhelm the deniers of truth who continue to play with vain trifles.

This description applies in the first place to the pagan Arabs, their primitive beliefs, insupportable concepts and their way of life which the Qur'ān describes in several places. It is all trifling play, nothing serious. They play like one hanging around in the middle of a lake, not aiming to reach the shore. Yet the description equally applies to anyone who leads their life on the basis of any concept other than the Islamic one. We cannot appreciate this unless we examine well known human concepts, as reflected in beliefs, legends or philosophies, and compare these with the Islamic concept of human existence in particular and the existence of the universe generally. All concepts, even those advanced by famous philosophers seem to be no more than children's attempts to arrive at the truth as compared with the simple, profound and powerful truth as expressed by Islam and the Qur'ān. This Islamic concept puts its address directly to human nature, free of exertion or complexity. Human nature immediately responds because what is presented to it fits perfectly with the profound truth inherent in it. It explains its relation to the universe, as well as the relation between the universe and its Creator.

As I read theories and concepts advanced by different philosophers, I often wonder at the strenuous efforts they exert to explain the existence

of the universe and its relations. They appear like a child attempting to solve an extremely complex mathematical problem. I look at the clear, simple, easy and natural approach the Qur'ān presents, which is free of crookedness and complexity. This is only to be expected for the Qur'ānic explanation of the universe is stated by the Creator of the universe. Philosophers' attempts are the product of small parts of the universe trying to explain its whole. The result of such miserable attempts is a foregone conclusion. When compared to the mature, sound and holistic concept the Qur'ān puts forward, they seem to be a medley of confusion, absurdity and child's play. Yet some people abandon the Qur'ānic picture and adopt those confused attempts!

A person may be influenced by some imperfect or deviant human attempt to explain life, human existence and the universe, and he will be confused as a result. He may then listen to a few verses of the Qur'ān addressing the subject he is struggling with and he will find comfort, enlightenment and a steady measure. There he will find that everything falls into place, where facts are stable, held in position. He will then be reassured by the clear truth presented by the Qur'ān. All confusion and worry will have disappeared.

People also appear to be playing with vain trifles when their concerns in life are compared to those Islam puts before people's minds, calling on them to implement these in their lives. A Muslim will look at the absurdity of such concerns. He will also look at those who indulge in them and who value them as great universal truths as simply absurd. Indeed, he looks at such people as a young girl looks at her doll, treating it as if it were a human being and talking to it as if it could share her thoughts.

Islam elevates people's concerns in as much as it elevates their concept of human existence and man's role in the universe. Furthermore, it provides clear and truthful answers to the questions everyone asks: Where have I come from, and why? Where do I go to when my term here is over? The Islamic answers to these questions define the true concept of existence. Man is not a unique kind of creature. He comes from where all creatures do, and he shares with them the reasons for their existence. He goes to where the Creator, in His infinite wisdom, determines. This means that the answers Islam provides for man's questions also give

man a complete explanation of the universe, the interrelation between its inhabitants, its relation with man, and the bond between them all and the Creator of all.

This explanation positively reflects on human concerns in life, elevating them. Therefore, a Muslim tends to think that other people's concerns are too trivial when compared with his preoccupation and the fulfilment of his major role in life. A Muslim's life is large because it is attached to the discharge of a great mission, one that relates to the existence of the universe and has a bearing on it. It is too precious to be wasted in trivialities.

The *sūrah* issues a serious warning about what happens to those who play with vain trifles "*on that day they will be irresistibly thrust into the fire of hell.*" (Verse 13) This is a violent image. The *sūrah* uses the Arabic word *da''an*, which signifies being pushed hard from behind. This suits those who spend their lives playing with trifles, unconcerned with what takes place around them. Hence, they are driven and pushed in the back until they stand at the edge of hell's fire, where they are told: "*This is the fire you used to deny.*" (Verse 14)

At this point of utter distress, being pushed hard in the back and facing the fire in front, the unbelievers are faced with a strong rebuke that refers to their earlier denials: "*So is this sorcery, or do you not see?*" (Verse 15) They used to label the Qur'ān as sorcery. Is the fire they are now facing also sorcery? Or is it the frightening truth? Or is it that they do not see the fire of hell in the same way as they could not see the truth of the Qur'ān?

When this sarcastic rebuke is over, they are made to despair of any relief for their distress: "*Burn in it! It will be the same whether you bear it with or without patience. You are being requited for what you have done.*" (Verse 16) Nothing is more painful to one who has to face such a calamity than to know that bearing it with patience is the same as showing no patience at all. It will continue unabated and cannot be evaded in any way. Their suffering will be the same whether they panic or take things in their stride. Furthermore, it will continue regardless of what they do now. This suffering is the requital for what they have already done. Hence it cannot be altered.

For Believers and Offspring

The second section of the *sūrah* is one of excitement, spreading comfort and happiness, particularly after the preceding scenes of outright distress:

> *The believers will be in gardens and in bliss, rejoicing in all that their Lord will have granted them; for their Lord will have warded off from them the suffering of the blazing fire. 'Eat and drink with healthy enjoyment as a reward for what you have done.' They will recline on couches arranged in rows, and We shall pair them with companions having most beautiful eyes. As for the believers whose offspring follow them in faith, We shall unite them with their offspring; and We shall not deny them anything of the reward for their deeds. Yet every individual will be held in pledge for his own deeds. We provide them with fruit and meat as they desire. They pass around a cup which will not lead to idle talk or to sin. They will be waited upon by youths of their own, [as pure] as pearls hidden in their shells. They will turn to one another, asking each other. They will say: 'When we were still living with our kinsfolk, we were full of fear, and so God has been gracious to us, and warded off from us suffering through the scorching wind. We used to pray to Him: He is the Beneficent, the Ever Merciful.'* (Verses 17–28)

This scene is close to material comfort. It is of the type that addresses feelings in the early period, tempting the human soul with physical pleasures in their refined form. It contrasts with the scene of crude painful suffering that those who are oblivious to the truth have to face: "*The believers will be in gardens and in bliss, rejoicing in all that their Lord will have granted them; for their Lord will have warded off from them the suffering of the blazing fire.*" (Verses 17–18) Just mere protection from the suffering of the fire which has already been described is a great blessing. How is it to be viewed then when it is coupled with admission into gardens and bliss? Moreover, these believers enjoy what God provides them with. It is all comfort and luxury plus hospitality and honour: "*Eat and drink with healthy enjoyment as a reward for what you have done.*" (Verse 19) This in itself is a great blessing.

As they are so addressed from on high, they are told that they deserve whatever reward they are given. Furthermore, they will "*recline on couches arranged in rows,*" giving them the pleasure of their brethren's company in such blissful surroundings. Yet, "*We shall pair them with companions having most beautiful eyes.*" (Verse 20) This represents man's best enjoyment.

Further honour is granted as their offspring, who are also believers, join them in their place of bliss. This is added care. Even if their offspring do not attain the standards of the God-fearing, as long as they are believers, they join their parents without detracting anything from their parents' reward. In no way, however, does this detract from personal responsibility and individual accountability. Rather, it is a favour that God bestows on them all: "*As for the believers whose offspring follow them in faith, We shall unite them with their offspring; and We shall not deny them anything of the reward of their deeds. Yet every individual will be held in pledge for his own deeds.*" (Verse 21)

More is added to the scene as we are introduced to other aspects of enjoyment in an atmosphere of perfect happiness. These dwellers of heaven are given varieties of fruits and meat, and they pass around a cup containing a drink that is totally different from the wines of this present world which loosen tongues with foul and dirty speech and tempt people into physical and mental sin. It is a pure drink causing no wrong: "*They pass around a cup which will not lead to idle talk or to sin.*" (Verse 23) They are gathered together as they pass it around, enjoying each other's company. At the same time they are served by youths who reflect pure innocence and a shining friendliness: "*They will be waited upon by youths of their own, [as pure] as pearls hidden in their shells.*" (Verse 24)

This warm and happy scene is carried further as we are shown how these people in heaven converse, recalling memories of their worldly lives and outlining the reasons that ensured their happy end, with all its security, luxury, gratification and bliss. Thus the secret is given out and the way leading to this blissful ending is marked for all travellers: "*They will turn to one another, asking each other. They will say: 'When we were still living with our kinsfolk, we were full of fear, and so God has been gracious to us, and warded off from us suffering through the scorching*

wind. We used to pray to Him: He is the Beneficent, the Ever Merciful.'" (Verses 25–28)

Thus, the secret is that they were always apprehensive about their outcome on the Day of Judgement. They feared what would happen when their records would be laid open and they would be called to account for their deeds. They entertained such apprehensions when they were with their families, enjoying seeming security, deceptive safety and dealing with worldly preoccupations. Yet they were neither deceived nor distracted. Therefore, God bestowed His grace on them and spared them the sort of suffering that seeps through the blood system like scorching poison. They realize that they are spared such suffering only by God's grace, which is bestowed in response to their fearing what the Day of Judgement might bring them. They certainly know that on its own, good action is not enough to admit the person doing it into heaven unless God bestows His grace on the person doing it. All that good action achieves is to testify that its doer has done his best, choosing what pleases God and earning His grace.

With all this fear and apprehension, the believers used to pray in earnest: "*We used to pray to Him.*" They were fully aware of those attributes of God that ensure goodly reward for His servants: "*He is the Beneficent, the Ever Merciful.*" (Verse 28)

A Reminder of God's Blessings

The *sūrah* now begins a series of rhetorical questions fashioned to a fast beat, presenting clear facts and addressing any remaining doubts the human soul might have. This round is full of strong challenges which no human heart can withstand:

> *So, [Prophet,] remind people. By the grace of your Lord, you are neither a soothsayer nor a madman. Or do they say, 'He is but a poet; let us await whatever misfortune time will bring him.' Say: 'Wait if you will. I too am waiting.' Is it their reason that prompts them to take this attitude? Or are they simply arrogant people? Or do they say, 'He has fabricated it himself?' They certainly do not believe. Let them, then, produce a discourse like it, if what they say is true. Were they created*

out of nothing? Were they the creators? Did they create the heavens and the earth? No. They have no faith. Do they possess your Lord's treasures? Or are they in ultimate control? Or have they a ladder to climb, in order to eavesdrop [on heaven's secrets]? Let their eavesdropper produce a clear proof. Is He to have only daughters and you sons? Do you [Prophet] demand a payment from them that would be burdened with debt? Do they have knowledge of the hidden reality so that they can write it down? Or do they want to entrap you? It is the unbelievers who are truly entrapped. Have they, then, any deity other than God? Exalted is God far above anything they associate with Him. Even if they see a part of the sky falling down, they would say, 'It is but a mass of clouds!' (Verses 29–44)

The address here is to the Prophet: "*So, remind people.*" (Verse 29) He should continue to remind people, undeterred by their rude and impolite behaviour or their false accusations. They used to say of him that he was a soothsayer, or a madman. These two descriptions are linked by the common notion that soothsayers received their information from the *jinn*, and that the *jinn* possessed those who were mad. Thus, the devil was the common element in both descriptions. What made them use either adjective – poet or sorcerer – to describe the Prophet was the fact that they were overwhelmed by the Qur'ān. Its address was so unfamiliar to them even though, by nature, they were highly eloquent. Since they could not even think of admitting that it was God's word, they felt that they needed to provide some plausible explanation for its superiority over anything they or others could say. Hence they claimed that it was imparted by the *jinn*, or that the *jinn* helped in its composition. They alleged that the man reciting it, i.e. Muḥammad, was either a soothsayer receiving information from the jinn, or a sorcerer relying on the *jinn*'s help, or a poet who had a *jinnee* friend, or a madman possessed by a *jinnee* who gave him such wonderful speech.

This is a wicked accusation. Therefore, God consoles His Messenger showing it to be of no importance and reassuring him that he continues to enjoy His favours which allow no element of soothsaying or madness to affect him: "*By the grace of your Lord, you are neither a soothsayer nor a madman.*" (Verse 29) This is followed by a denunciation of their

assertion that he was a poet: "*Or do they say, 'He is but a poet; let us await whatever misfortune time will bring him.*'" (Verse 30) They indeed said that. Some of them counselled others to "bear with him, stick to our ways and soon enough he will die and we will be rid of him." Hence the Prophet is instructed to give them an implicit threat in his reply: "*Say: 'Wait if you will. I too am waiting.*'" (Verse 31) Soon enough, you will know who will end up in a better position.

Some of the Quraysh elders were accorded a position of respect on account of their perceived wisdom in conducting affairs. These are referred to here with a clear note of sarcasm, as their attitude to Islam is the antithesis of wisdom and logic. The *sūrah* sarcastically wonders whether the descriptions they attach to Muḥammad (peace be upon him) are what their wise elders have arrived at? Or is it that they are arrogant, unjust people who do not listen to what the wise elders counsel: "*Is it their reason that prompts them to take this attitude? Or are they simply arrogant people?*" (Verse 32) The first question is loaded with sharp sarcasm; the second carries an accusation that should put them to shame. One or the other is indeed true when they adopt such an absurd attitude.

They were always rude in what they said about the Prophet. They even accused him of fabricating what he said to them. The *sūrah* disapprovingly wonders whether they have made such a claim of fabrication against the Prophet, implying that such an allegation could never have been made: "*Or do they say, 'He has fabricated it himself?*'" (Verse 33) It immediately explains what lies behind such a singular allegation: "*They certainly do not believe.*" (Verse 33) The fact that in their hearts they did not really believe is the reason why they made such a statement. They simply cannot appreciate the true nature of the Qur'ān. Had they appreciated it they would have known that no human being could have authored it, and that it could only have been delivered by a man of truth.

Since their hearts cannot appreciate the truth of this revelation, the *sūrah* challenges them to provide irrefutable proof: "*Let them, then, produce a discourse like it, if what they say is true.*" (Verse 34) This challenge occurs several times in the Qur'ān, yet those who deny the truth of the Qur'ān could not take up the challenge. Furthermore, this

challenge remains valid for the rest of time, and no one will ever be able to produce anything like the Qur'ān.

The Qur'ān has a special secret which is felt by everyone who begins to look at its text, before even attempting to identify its many miraculous aspects. He feels that the very words themselves speak with special authority. He senses that there is something extra, beyond the meanings the words impart to us; something that is felt by the heart as soon as one listens to the Qur'ān. Some people feel this very clearly, while others sense it even though they cannot identify it. Nonetheless it is there. It cannot be traced back to anything in particular: the phraseology, the meaning, the images and connotations, the special music that is so different from the rhythm of any other speech. Or is it produced by a combination of all these elements, or by these and something else beyond them that we cannot identify? This is something that is present in every Qur'ānic text, and it is felt initially by everyone who handles a Qur'ānic *sūrah*. Beyond this, there are phenomena that we can recognize and understand when we study the Qur'ān and contemplate its meanings and construction.

These phenomena are recognized in the clear, comprehensive and true concept the Qur'ān presents to our hearts and minds of the truth of human existence, of existence as a whole, and the essential truth of God Almighty. They are seen in the Qur'ānic method that seeks to implant this concept in man's mind as it addresses his nature in a way that is totally unfamiliar in human address. The Qur'ān appeals to the human mind with all its many facets, reflecting profound knowledge of man's every angle. We see the superiority of the Qur'ān in the comprehensiveness, balance and coherence of its directives that are all placed on the same level. This phenomenon is unknown in the works of human beings that cannot maintain the same situation or the same standard, and cannot address all aspects at the same time. Nothing that man produces can reflect absolute balance that admits neither increase nor decrease, and suffers neither shortage nor extravagance. No human work achieves absolute coherence that admits no discord or conflict either in essence or detail.

These and similar phenomena, as well as the subtle and the undeniably secret, combine to give the Qur'ān its quality of an absolute miracle that

remains valid for all time. No self respecting person can argue about this. He will readily admit the truth that stares him clearly in the face whenever he looks at the Qur'ān with an open mind: "*Let them, then, produce a discourse like it, if what they say is true.*" (Verse 34)

The next question wonders at their own existence, a truth staring them in the face which they cannot explain in any way other than what the Qur'ān states: God, the Creator of all that exists has brought them into existence: "*Were they created out of nothing? Were they the creators?*" (Verse 35) The thought that they just existed out of nothing is against the logic of nature. It merits no argument. On the other hand, neither they nor any other creature can claim that they created themselves. As neither case can be logically entertained, there only remains the true case stated in the Qur'ān, confirming that they are all creatures of God, the only Creator and Originator. Since no one can claim any share of His attributes of creation and origination, then Lordship and Godhead belong solely to Him. This is clear and true logic.

The *sūrah* then directs their attention to the heavens and the earth: are they the ones who created these? Needless to say, the heavens and the earth did not create themselves, in the same way as humans do not do so: "*Did they create the heavens and the earth? No. They have no faith.*" (Verse 36) Neither they, nor anyone listening to the logic of nature, claim that the heavens and the earth created themselves or came into existence without being created. Nor do those people claim that they created them. Yet they stand in front of people like a question requiring an answer. When those very unbelievers were asked who created the heavens and the earth, they said that God created them. Yet this truth did not acquire such clarity as to produce its normal effects in their hearts and minds, leading them to formulate true and clear conviction: "*They have no faith.*" (Verse 36)

The *sūrah* then takes them a step lower than that of the creation of either themselves or the world around them. It asks them whether they own God's treasures or have control of these so as to be able to cause benefit and harm: "*Do they possess your Lord's treasures? Or are they in ultimate control?*" (Verse 37) If they make no such claim, then who owns these treasures and controls all things? The Qur'ān says that God is the One who gives in plenty or in small measure, and who determines

all affairs in the universe. This is the only explanation of what happens in the universe.

A further step down is then taken, and the *sūrah* asks whether they have any means to listen to the source of revelation: "*Or have they a ladder to climb, in order to eavesdrop [on heaven's secrets]? Let their eavesdropper produce a clear proof.*" (Verse 38) Muḥammad (peace be upon him) tells them that he is a Messenger of God and that he receives revelations from on high. They reject this, claiming it as false. The *sūrah* asks whether they have the means to climb up and listen to what He says, gaining information that supports their claims that he receives no such revelations, and asserts that the truth is contrary to what he says. This requires that they provide compelling evidence in support of their claims. This is an allusion to the great authority the Qur'ān speaks with, yet they reject its clear and powerful message.

The *sūrah* then brings into focus one of their absurd claims, alleging that the angels are God's daughters. It addresses them directly, adding an element of further reproach: "*Is He to have only daughters and you sons?*" (Verse 39) They considered girls to be inferior to boys, and anyone of them would be full of gloom and frustration when they were told that they had begot girls. Yet they unashamedly attribute female offspring to God Almighty. Thus the *sūrah* uses their own traditions and values to shame them.

They disliked receiving the Prophet's address. They disliked his message of guidance, feeling that it was a burden, even though it was given to them clear and pure. He asked no wages or payment for his trouble. The least that such a free presentation deserves is an appreciative response and a gentle refusal if they did not want to accept what he offered. Hence, the *sūrah* denounces their unjustified attitude: "*Do you [Prophet] demand a payment from them that would be burdened with debt?*" (Verse 40) Since they are not asked to pay anything for it, their attitude appears to be totally indefensible and unwarranted. They should be ashamed of themselves.

Again, the *sūrah* puts before them their true position in this universe. They are creatures with certain limitations. They are given access to a certain portion of this world, beyond which they cannot penetrate. It all belongs to the Creator. What lies beyond their reach is God's own

preserve and they have no knowledge of it: "*Do they have knowledge of the hidden reality so that they can write it down?*" (Verse 41) They are well aware that they have no knowledge of what lies beyond their perception even though it is a reality. They have no means of accessing it. It is God who writes in its record whatever He determines for His creatures, while they cannot write a thing in it.

The One who is in control of that hidden reality and whatever occurs in that hidden realm is indeed the One who can determine and scheme. How come, then, that in their position of inability to record anything they try to scheme against you, aiming to entrap you? Why do they imagine that they can determine any future event, saying of the Prophet that he is a poet who would soon die? "*Or do they want to entrap you? It is the unbelievers who are truly entrapped.*" (Verse 42) It is they who are subject to whatever is determined by the Creator and Controller of the hidden reality. His schemes will certainly apply to them and take their effect. He is the best of all schemers.

"*Have they, then, any deity other than God?*" (Verse 43) Does such a deity, if they have one, protect them against what God determines for them? "*Exalted is God far above anything they associate with Him.*" (Verse 43) How absurd is their false concept of God!

With this exaltation of God and its clear statement of His oneness this series of rhetorical questions, characterized by a powerful beat, is concluded. All their arguments have been refuted, and all doubts removed. They are presented with the clear truth and left without any excuse to justify their hostility to it. At this point their stubbornness in rejecting the clear truth is put clearly before their eyes: "*Even if they see a part of the sky falling down, they would say, 'It is but a mass of clouds!'*" (Verse 44) This means that even if God decides to punish them by making a part of the sky fall down upon them, destroying their world, and they see it falling on their heads, they would still claim that it is but a mass of clouds, bringing rain and prosperity. It is just like the one who denies the truth of what he sees, even with a sword piercing his neck, as it were. This may be a reference to what the people of 'Ād said when they saw the clouds heralding their own destruction. They claimed: "*This cloud will bring us rain.*" (46: 24) The truth was then told to them: "*No, indeed. It is the very thing you wanted to hasten: a*

stormwind bearing painful suffering which will destroy everything by the command of its Lord." (46: 24–25)

Perfect Contrast

At this point, the *sūrah* instructs the Prophet to leave them alone. They will certainly face the day mentioned at the beginning of the *sūrah* and the severe punishment it will bring them. He is to remain steadfast in the face of whatever is determined by his Lord who bestows His care on him. He is to glorify his Lord when he wakes up early in the morning, in the depths of the night and at the time when the stars disappear:

> *Leave them, then, until they face the day when they will be thunderstruck; the day when none of their scheming will be of any avail to them, when they will receive no support. Closer at hand more suffering awaits the wrongdoers, but most of them are not aware of it. So, await in patience your Lord's judgement; for you are under Our watchful eyes. Extol your Lord's limitless glory and praise when you rise, and extol His glory at night, and at the time when the stars retreat.* (Verses 45–49)

This final passage begins with a clear warning against what will happen on that frightening day when the trumpet is first blown and they are all totally stunned. This takes place shortly before the resurrection, when nothing will be of benefit and no help can be expected from any quarter. If, in this life, they are able to scheme and take action, nothing can stave off what will happen on that day. However, they will also endure another type of suffering before that. This is left unspecified, but it is certain to happen: "*Closer at hand more suffering awaits the wrongdoers, but most of them are not aware of it.*" (Verse 47)

Thus this long and determined attack is concluded, bringing the unbelievers face to face with the severe punishments that await them, one close at hand and the other to occur later. The *sūrah* then speaks to the Prophet who was the target of their false accusations. He is instructed to face such adversity with patience. He is to remain steadfast, continuing his efforts to advocate God's message, and to leave the decision to God

who determines whatever He will: "*So, await in patience your Lord's judgement.*" (Verse 48)

Yet this directive is coupled with a confirmation of God's kindly care. Such loving care is certain to remove all hardship that the Prophet may have to face. Thus, perseverance in the face of adversity becomes acceptable, and even welcome, since it is the means to such compassionate care: "*For you are under Our watchful eyes.*" (Verse 48) This expression is unique, describing a position that has never been attained by any human being. Nowhere else in the Qur'ān is this expression used, even though some similar expressions of overflowing care are used.

Moses, for example, is told: "*Know that I have chosen you. Listen, then, to what is being revealed.*" (20: 13) "*I lavished My love on you, so that you may be reared under My watchful eye.*" (20: 39) "*I have chosen you for Myself.*" (20: 41) All these expressions speak of highly exalted positions, but Muḥammad (peace be upon him) is given an even higher distinction with this unique expression: "*For you are under Our watchful eyes.*" (Verse 48) This statement implies a unique aspect of friendliness and care. It imparts unparalleled connotations that no human expression can adequately describe. Therefore, we will not attempt any more than this reference to the fact.

Finally, the way to maintain this close contact is outlined: "*Extol your Lord's limitless glory and praise when you rise, and extol His glory at night, and at the time when the stars retreat.*" (Verses 48–49) Thus, throughout the day, as one wakes up, during the night, at the time when stars begin to disappear at dawn, there is a clear chance to enjoy such friendly care. Glorifying God imparts strength, friendliness and the chance of a heartfelt address to God Almighty. All this stems from a dearly loving heart!

SŪRAH 53

Al-Najm
(The Star)

Prologue

As a whole, this *sūrah* comes across as a superb symphony. From start to finish, a fine tune runs through its verbal structure, as well as its rhyming verse endings. This is especially apparent and deliberate at certain points, where a word is added or preferred to maintain the beat or the rhyme, in addition to how it enhances the meaning. One example is found in the two verses saying: "*Have you considered al-Lāt and al-'Uzzā, and Manāt, the third other?*" (Verses 19–20) Had the second verse said, 'and Manāt, the third', the metre would have been broken and the beat would not have been maintained. On the other hand, had it said, 'and Manāt, the other one,' the rhyme would not have been maintained. Each of the words used contributes to the meaning, but maintaining the metre and the rhyme is also deliberate. The same may be said where the word then is used in the verses: "*Are you to have the male and He the female? That would then be an unfair division.*" (Verses 21–22) This word *idhan*, or then, is necessary to maintain the metre and the beat, but it also serves an artistic purpose.[1]

1. Needless to say, we are speaking here of the original Arabic text. The translation cannot maintain any metre or rhyme. The same rhyme is maintained throughout the *sūrah*, apart from the last six verses when it varies. – Editor's note.

The beat in this *sūrah* is of a special musical type in which we note an easy variation and flow, particularly in the first and the last sections. Such variation and flow are in harmony with the images, lively shades and connotations we note in the opening section, as also with the meanings and superb touches in the closing section.

The opening provides images from the world on high where the events to which the *sūrah* refers take place. Further connotations are added by reference to the free movement of the trustworthy Spirit, the Angel Gabriel, as he appeared before the Prophet. All these images, scenes, connotations, movements and spiritual atmosphere interact with the tune and the beat in perfect harmony, mutually strengthening their effects. This imparts a special atmosphere to the whole *sūrah*, leaving a marked effect on its succeeding sections, until it concludes on a profoundly powerful note, one that is felt by every part of our souls and every cell in our bodies.

The theme the *sūrah* tackles is the one that pervades all *sūrahs* revealed in Makkah: faith and its major concepts consisting of revelation, God's oneness and the hereafter. The *sūrah* tackles this from a particular angle emphasizing the truth of revelation and the solid foundation of faith as compared with the fallacy of idolatry, which lacks foundation.

The first section illustrates the truth and nature of revelation. It describes two scenes that confirm its actual process. This documents the fact that the Prophet received revelation from Gabriel, the angel, whom he saw, as also from the greatest signs of his Lord.

In the second section, the *sūrah* speaks of the unbelievers' alleged deities, al-Lāt, al-'Uzzā and Manāt. It also discusses their superstitions about the angels being God's daughters. It states that the unbelievers rely on nothing but conjecture, which is devoid of truth. By contrast, the Prophet calls on them to believe in his message, which is certain to be true, with solid evidence.

The *sūrah* tells the Prophet in its third section that he should ignore those who turn away from God's message, those who preoccupy themselves with this present world, knowing nothing beyond it. It also refers to the hereafter and what it provides of requital for people's actions. It mentions that God knows all beings, ever since He originated them from the earth and when they were still in their mothers' wombs. Indeed,

He knows them better than they know their own selves. Their requital will be based on this certain knowledge; it defines their destiny.

The fourth and final section speaks about the main themes of faith, which have remained the same since the earliest of the divine messages: namely, individual responsibility, accurate reckoning, just reward, and the return of all creatures to their Lord who determines what happens to them as He wills. Added to this is a quick reference to the fate suffered by earlier communities that denied the divine message. The *sūrah* then concludes with a strong beat commanding all mankind to prostrate themselves before God and worship Him alone. Thus, the opening and the end provide a harmony of images, connotations, effects and musical tones.

Al-Najm (The Star)

سورة النجم

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

By the star as it sets. (1)

وَالنَّجْمِ إِذَا هَوَىٰ (١)

This fellow-man of yours has not gone astray, nor is he deluded. (2)

مَا ضَلَّ صَاحِبُكُمْ وَمَا غَوَىٰ (٢)

He does not speak out of his own fancy. (3)

وَمَا يَنطِقُ عَنِ الْهَوَىٰ (٣)

That [which he delivers to you] is nothing less than a revelation sent down to him, (4)

إِنْ هُوَ إِلَّا وَحْيٌ يُوحَىٰ (٤)

something that a very mighty one has taught him, (5)

عَلَّمَهُ شَدِيدُ الْقُوَىٰ (٥)

[an angel] of surpassing power, who stood (6)

ذُو مِرَّةٍ فَاسْتَوَىٰ (٦)

on the highest horizon, (7)

وَهُوَ بِالْأُفُقِ الْأَعْلَىٰ (٧)

and then drew near, and came close, (8)

ثُمَّ دَنَا فَتَدَلَّىٰ (٨)

until he was two bow-lengths away, or even closer, (9)

فَكَانَ قَابَ قَوْسَيْنِ أَوْ أَدْنَىٰ (٩)

and revealed to God's servant what he revealed. (10)

فَأَوْحَىٰ إِلَىٰ عَبْدِهِ مَا أَوْحَىٰ (١٠)

[Muḥammad's] heart did not belie what he saw. (11)

مَا كَذَبَ ٱلْفُؤَادُ مَا رَأَىٰ ﴿١١﴾

Will you, then, contend with him over what he sees? (12)

أَفَتُمَٰرُونَهُۥ عَلَىٰ مَا يَرَىٰ ﴿١٢﴾

Indeed, he saw him a second time (13)

وَلَقَدْ رَءَاهُ نَزْلَةً أُخْرَىٰ ﴿١٣﴾

by the lote tree of the farthest limit, (14)

عِندَ سِدْرَةِ ٱلْمُنتَهَىٰ ﴿١٤﴾

near to the garden of abode, (15)

عِندَهَا جَنَّةُ ٱلْمَأْوَىٰٓ ﴿١٥﴾

when the lote tree was shrouded with whatever shrouded it. (16)

إِذْ يَغْشَى ٱلسِّدْرَةَ مَا يَغْشَىٰ ﴿١٦﴾

The eye did not waver, nor was it too bold; (17)

مَا زَاغَ ٱلْبَصَرُ وَمَا طَغَىٰ ﴿١٧﴾

he certainly saw some of the greatest signs of his Lord. (18)

لَقَدْ رَأَىٰ مِنْ ءَايَٰتِ رَبِّهِ ٱلْكُبْرَىٰٓ ﴿١٨﴾

Have you considered al-Lāt and al-'Uzzā, (19)

أَفَرَءَيْتُمُ ٱللَّٰتَ وَٱلْعُزَّىٰ ﴿١٩﴾

and Manāt, the third other? (20)

وَمَنَوٰةَ ٱلثَّالِثَةَ ٱلْأُخْرَىٰٓ ﴿٢٠﴾

Are you to have the male and He the female? (21)

أَلَكُمُ ٱلذَّكَرُ وَلَهُ ٱلْأُنثَىٰ ﴿٢١﴾

That would then be an unfair division. (22)

تِلْكَ إِذًا قِسْمَةٌ ضِيزَىٰٓ ﴿٢٢﴾

These are nothing but names which you have invented – you and your forefathers – for which God has given no authority. They [who disbelieve] follow nothing but surmise and the whims of their own souls, even though right guidance from their Lord has now come to them. (23)

إِنْ هِيَ إِلَّآ أَسْمَآءٌ سَمَّيْتُمُوهَآ أَنتُمْ وَءَابَآؤُكُم مَّآ أَنزَلَ ٱللَّهُ بِهَا مِن سُلْطَٰنٍ ۚ إِن يَتَّبِعُونَ إِلَّا ٱلظَّنَّ وَمَا تَهْوَى ٱلْأَنفُسُ ۖ وَلَقَدْ جَآءَهُم مِّن رَّبِّهِمُ ٱلْهُدَىٰٓ ﴿٢٣﴾

Is man to have all that he may wish for, (24)

أَمْ لِلْإِنسَٰنِ مَا تَمَنَّىٰ ﴿٢٤﴾

when both the life to come and this present life belong to God alone? (25)

فَلِلَّهِ ٱلْءَاخِرَةُ وَٱلْأُولَىٰ ﴿٢٥﴾

Numerous are the angels in the heavens, yet their intercession will avail nothing until God has given leave to whomever He wills and with whom He is pleased. (26)

وَكَم مِّن مَّلَكٍ فِى ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ لَا تُغْنِى شَفَٰعَتُهُمْ شَيْـًٔا إِلَّا مِنۢ بَعْدِ أَن يَأْذَنَ ٱللَّهُ لِمَن يَشَآءُ وَيَرْضَىٰٓ ﴿٢٦﴾

Those who do not believe in the life to come give the angels female names. (27)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ بِٱلْءَاخِرَةِ لَيُسَمُّونَ ٱلْمَلَٰٓئِكَةَ تَسْمِيَةَ ٱلْأُنثَىٰ ﴿٢٧﴾

Yet of this they have no knowledge. They follow nothing but surmise, but surmise can never take the place of truth. (28)

وَمَا لَهُم بِهِۦ مِنْ عِلْمٍ ۖ إِن يَتَّبِعُونَ إِلَّا ٱلظَّنَّ ۖ وَإِنَّ ٱلظَّنَّ لَا يُغْنِى مِنَ ٱلْحَقِّ شَيْـًٔا ﴿٢٨﴾

So, ignore those who turn away from Our message and care only for the life of this world. (29)

فَأَعْرِضْ عَن مَّن تَوَلَّىٰ عَن ذِكْرِنَا وَلَمْ يُرِدْ إِلَّا ٱلْحَيَوٰةَ ٱلدُّنْيَا ﴿٢٩﴾

ذَٰلِكَ مَبْلَغُهُم مِّنَ الْعِلْمِ ۚ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ هُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِمَن ضَلَّ عَن سَبِيلِهِ وَهُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِمَنِ اهْتَدَىٰ ﴿٣٠﴾

Such is the sum of their knowledge. Your Lord knows best who strays from His path, and He knows best who follows right guidance. (30)

وَلِلَّهِ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ لِيَجْزِيَ الَّذِينَ أَسَاءُوا بِمَا عَمِلُوا وَيَجْزِيَ الَّذِينَ أَحْسَنُوا بِالْحُسْنَى ﴿٣١﴾

Indeed, to God belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth. He will requite those who do evil in accordance with what they did, and will reward those who do good with what is best. (31)

الَّذِينَ يَجْتَنِبُونَ كَبَائِرَ الْإِثْمِ وَالْفَوَاحِشَ إِلَّا اللَّمَمَ ۚ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ وَاسِعُ الْمَغْفِرَةِ ۚ هُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِكُمْ إِذْ أَنشَأَكُم مِّنَ الْأَرْضِ وَإِذْ أَنتُمْ أَجِنَّةٌ فِي بُطُونِ أُمَّهَاتِكُمْ ۖ فَلَا تُزَكُّوا أَنفُسَكُمْ ۖ هُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِمَنِ اتَّقَىٰ ﴿٣٢﴾

As for those who avoid grave sins and shameful deeds, apart from casual indulgence, your Lord is abounding in forgiveness. He is fully aware of you when He brings you into being out of the earth, and when you are still hidden in your mothers' wombs. Do not, then, assert your own goodness. He knows best those who are truly God-fearing. (32)

أَفَرَأَيْتَ الَّذِي تَوَلَّىٰ ﴿٣٣﴾

Consider the one who turns away: (33)

وَأَعْطَىٰ قَلِيلًا وَأَكْدَىٰ ﴿٣٤﴾

he gives little at first then hardens and stops. (34)

أَعِندَهُ عِلْمُ الْغَيْبِ فَهُوَ يَرَىٰ ﴿٣٥﴾

Does he have knowledge of what lies beyond the reach of human perception so that he can clearly see? (35)

Has he never been told of what is written in the revelations given to Moses, (36)

أَمْ لَمْ يُنَبَّأْ بِمَا فِى صُحُفِ مُوسَىٰ ﴿٣٦﴾

and to Abraham who was true to his trust: (37)

وَإِبْرَٰهِيمَ ٱلَّذِى وَفَّىٰٓ ﴿٣٧﴾

that no soul shall bear the burden of another; (38)

أَلَّا تَزِرُ وَازِرَةٌ وِزْرَ أُخْرَىٰ ﴿٣٨﴾

that man will only have what he strives for; (39)

وَأَن لَّيْسَ لِلْإِنسَٰنِ إِلَّا مَا سَعَىٰ ﴿٣٩﴾

that his labour will be seen (40)

وَأَنَّ سَعْيَهُۥ سَوْفَ يُرَىٰ ﴿٤٠﴾

and he will be given the fullest reward for it; (41)

ثُمَّ يُجْزَىٰهُ ٱلْجَزَآءَ ٱلْأَوْفَىٰ ﴿٤١﴾

that with your Lord is the ultimate end; (42)

وَأَنَّ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ ٱلْمُنتَهَىٰ ﴿٤٢﴾

that it is He who causes [people] to laugh and weep; (43)

وَأَنَّهُۥ هُوَ أَضْحَكَ وَأَبْكَىٰ ﴿٤٣﴾

and it is He who deals death and gives life; (44)

وَأَنَّهُۥ هُوَ أَمَاتَ وَأَحْيَا ﴿٤٤﴾

that it is He who creates the two sexes, male and female, (45)

وَأَنَّهُۥ خَلَقَ ٱلزَّوْجَيْنِ ٱلذَّكَرَ وَٱلْأُنثَىٰ ﴿٤٥﴾

from a seed as it is lodged in place; (46)

مِن نُّطْفَةٍ إِذَا تُمْنَىٰ ﴿٤٦﴾

that it is He who brings about a second life; (47)

وَأَنَّ عَلَيْهِ ٱلنَّشْأَةَ ٱلْأُخْرَىٰ ﴿٤٧﴾

that it is He who gives riches and possessions; (48)

وَأَنَّهُۥ هُوَ أَغْنَىٰ وَأَقْنَىٰ ﴿٤٨﴾

that He is the Lord of Sirius; (49)

وَأَنَّهُۥ هُوَ رَبُّ ٱلشِّعْرَىٰ ﴿٤٩﴾

that it is He who destroyed the ancient 'Ād; (50)

وَأَنَّهُۥٓ أَهْلَكَ عَادًا ٱلْأُولَىٰ ﴿٥٠﴾

and Thamūd, leaving no trace of them; (51)

وَثَمُودَا۟ فَمَآ أَبْقَىٰ ﴿٥١﴾

as well as Noah's people before them, for these were truly most unjust and most overweening; (52)

وَقَوْمَ نُوحٍ مِّن قَبْلُ ۖ إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا۟ هُمْ أَظْلَمَ وَأَطْغَىٰ ﴿٥٢﴾

that it is He who brought down the ruined cities (53)

وَٱلْمُؤْتَفِكَةَ أَهْوَىٰ ﴿٥٣﴾

enveloping them with whatever came over them. (54)

فَغَشَّىٰهَا مَا غَشَّىٰ ﴿٥٤﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you still doubt? (55)

فَبِأَىِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكَ تَتَمَارَىٰ ﴿٥٥﴾

This is a warning like those warnings given in former times. (56)

هَٰذَا نَذِيرٌ مِّنَ ٱلنُّذُرِ ٱلْأُولَىٰٓ ﴿٥٦﴾

The imminent Hour draws ever nearer. (57)

أَزِفَتِ ٱلْءَازِفَةُ ﴿٥٧﴾

None but God can remove it. (58)

لَيْسَ لَهَا مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ كَاشِفَةٌ ﴿٥٨﴾

Do you find this discourse strange? (59)	أَفَمِنْ هَٰذَا ٱلْحَدِيثِ تَعْجَبُونَ ﴿٥٩﴾
Do you laugh instead of weeping, (60)	وَتَضْحَكُونَ وَلَا تَبْكُونَ ﴿٦٠﴾
and pay no heed? (61)	وَأَنتُمْ سَٰمِدُونَ ﴿٦١﴾
Prostrate yourselves before God and worship Him alone. (62)	فَٱسْجُدُوا۟ لِلَّهِ وَٱعْبُدُوا۟ ۩ ﴿٦٢﴾

As the Prophet Receives Revelation

> *By the star when it sets. This fellow-man of yours has not gone astray, nor is he deluded. He does not speak out of his own fancy. That [which he delivers to you] is nothing less than a revelation sent down to him, something that a very mighty one has taught him, [an angel] of surpassing power, who stood on the highest horizon, and then drew near, and came close, until he was two bow-lengths away, or even closer, and revealed to God's servant what he revealed. [Muḥammad's] heart did not belie what he saw. Will you, then, contend with him over what he sees? Indeed, he saw him a second time by the lote tree of the farthest limit, near to the garden of abode, when the lote tree was shrouded with whatever shrouded it. The eye did not waver, nor was it too bold; he certainly saw some of the greatest signs of his Lord.* (Verses 1–18)

As we recite this opening, we live for a few moments on the sublime expanse experienced by the Prophet's heart. We rise over wings of light to join the company on high. We listen to the smooth beat echoed in the words, their meanings and the message they impart. We live with the Prophet's heart as it looks on, with all curtains and covers removed. He receives revelation from on high, listens and looks, and he commits to memory what was revealed to him. These moments were a special experience given only to his purified heart, but God favours His servants

by giving them an inspiring description that imparts to them a feeling of the message, its echoes and meanings. He describes to them the journey that took his blessed heart to the heavens above, step by step, scene by scene and stage after stage, as if they too are witnessing it all.

This inspiring description starts with an oath made by God: "*By the star as it sets.*" (Verse 1) The brilliant shining of stars before they set on the horizon is similar to the image drawn of Gabriel, the object of the oath. He is first "*on the highest horizon, and then drew near, and came close, until he was two bow-lengths away, or even closer, and revealed to God's servant what he revealed.*" (Verses 7–10) Thus starts the harmony between the scene, the movement, the connotations and the rhythm.

"*By the star as it sets.*" (Verse 1) Reports differ as to the star referred to in this oath. The closest that comes to mind is that of Sirius, which was worshipped by some people in the past. It is mentioned later in the *sūrah*, as it says of God: "*He is the Lord of Sirius.*" (Verse 49) People in olden times paid special attention to this star. Ancient Egyptians used to link the flooding of the Nile to Sirius as it crossed the highest orbit. They watched it carefully to monitor the level of water in the Nile. It also has a special position in Persian and Arabian legends. It is probable, therefore, that the oath by the star at the beginning of the *sūrah* refers to it. That the image chosen here is that of the star's falling and setting is significant, as it suggests that no matter how great a star is in size and position, it falls down and changes place. It does not, then, deserve to be worshipped. What is worshipped should always be high and permanent.

The main object of the oath is the Prophet and the revelation given to him:

> *This fellow-man of yours has not gone astray, nor is he deluded. He does not speak out of his own fancy. That [which he delivers to you] is nothing less than a revelation sent down to him.* (Verses 2–4)

This friend of yours is on the right course, well guided, sincere, gives you good advice, delivering the truth, free of error, illusions, fabrications and fancy. It is all a revelation bestowed on him from on high, and he delivers what is revealed to him in all honesty. The one who brings

him this revelation is well known, following a well-charted course. The Prophet saw him with his own eyes and mind:

> *A very mighty one has taught him, [an angel] of surpassing power, who stood on the highest horizon, and then drew near, and came close, until he was two bow-lengths away, or even closer, and revealed to God's servant what he revealed. [Muḥammad's] heart did not belie what he saw. Will you, then, contend with him over what he sees?* (Verses 5–12)

This mighty angel of surpassing power is Gabriel. It is he who has taught your friend, Muḥammad. His journey is detailed here. It began on the highest horizon where the Prophet saw him at the start of revelation. He saw Gabriel as God created him, covering the horizon with his enormous body. He then drew near and came closer towards the Prophet until he was very near to him, or, as the *sūrah* says, '*two bow-lengths away, or even closer*', which indicates very close proximity. He then revealed to him whatever he revealed, leaving the subject matter vague to indicate that it is momentous.

Thus, it is a case of seeing someone very close up after he had initially appeared at a distance, and then there is revelation, teaching, looking closely and being certain. In such conditions there can be no lie in what is reported. This truth does not allow for argument or dispute: "*[Muḥammad's] heart did not belie what he saw. Will you, then, contend with him over what he sees?*" (Verses 11–12) A heart's vision is more certain because it precludes any deception that might cloud a person's eyesight. He saw and made sure. His heart was then certain that he saw the angel bearing divine revelations. The angel is a messenger God sends to teach the Prophet and assign to him the task of delivering to mankind what he has learnt. There can be no more dispute or argument.

This was not the only time the Prophet saw the Angel Gabriel in his original form. The *sūrah* itself identifies there was another time:

> *Indeed, he saw him a second time by the lote tree of the farthest limit, near to the garden of abode, when the lote tree was shrouded with whatever shrouded it. The eye did not waver, nor was it too bold; he certainly saw some of the greatest signs of his Lord.* (Verses 13–18)

This was, according to weightier reports, when the Prophet went on his night journey and ascended to heaven. Gabriel came close to the Prophet in the shape and form God gave him, and this was '*by the lote tree of the farthest limit.*' The farthest limit may mean the point where everything ends, as it is close to the garden of abode. It may also mean the point at which the Prophet's journey taking him to heaven ended. Alternatively, it could mean where Gabriel's company ended, as he stood there when the Prophet ascended a further step taking him closer to his Lord's Throne. All this is known only to God, and He gave this knowledge to His chosen Messenger. This is the only information we have of it, and it is beyond our power to fathom. No human being can understand this except by God's will, the Creator of man and angel, who knows the capabilities of each.

The *sūrah* mentions what affected the scene at the lote tree of the farthest end to further emphasize that it was all real: "*when the lote tree was shrouded with whatever shrouded it.*" (Verse 16) We are given no details because the matter is too serious to think about anything further. All this was absolutely certain: "*The eye did not waver, nor was it too bold.*" (Verse 17) Nothing affected his eyesight so as to blur his vision. It was indeed a clear, well-defined vision that admitted no doubt. He saw on that trip some of the greatest signs of his Lord, looking directly at these essential truths as they appeared before him free of any make up.

Hence, the question of revelation is one based on clear vision, a well-defined scene, absolute certainty, direct contact, accurate knowledge, real company and an actual journey with its details outlined. It is on the basis of such certainty that your friend's mission is based, even though you continue to reject what he says, casting doubt about his claims. Yet you have known this friend for a very long time, testing his truthfulness and confirming it. His Lord confirms what he says and swears to its truth. He reports to you how he was given revelation and in what circumstances this was imparted. He tells you the circumstances when the revelation is given to him, and by whom: how he saw him and where.

Claiming Divinity for Idols

Such is the irrefutable truth in which Muḥammad (peace be upon him) called them to believe. What basis, then, do they have for their worship and superstitions of alleged deities? How can they justify their worship of al-Lāt, al-'Uzzā and Manāt? How can they prove their dubious claims that these were angels, and that the angels were God's daughters, or that they can intercede with God on people's behalf? Do they have anything to support these claims?

> *Have you considered al-Lāt and al-'Uzzā, and Manāt, the third other? Are you to have the male and He the female? That would then be an unfair division. These are nothing but names which you have invented – you and your forefathers – for which God has given no authority. They [who disbelieve] follow nothing but surmise and the whims of their own souls, even though right guidance from their Lord has now come to them. Is man to have all that he may wish for, when both the life to come and this present life belong to God alone? Numerous are the angels in the heavens, yet their intercession will avail nothing until God has given leave to whomever He wills and with whom He is pleased. Those who do not believe in the life to come give the angels female names. Yet of this they have no knowledge. They follow nothing but surmise, but surmise can never take the place of truth.* (Verses 19–28)

Al-Lāt was a carved white rock, enclosed within a building covered with curtains, and with attendants serving it. Surrounding the building was a courtyard that the tribe of Thaqīf living in Ṭā'if, as well as tribes in the surrounding area, venerated. They were considered exceptionally honoured among Arab tribes, not however surpassing the Quraysh, for having it in their hometown. Needless to say, the Quraysh had the greater honour of having the Ka'bah, built by Abraham, in their city. It is thought that the name al-Lāt was considered as being the feminine form of God's Arabic name, Allah.

Al-'Uzzā was a tree around which a building was built and with curtains raised. It was at Nakhlah, between Makkah and Ṭā'if. The Quraysh in particular used to venerate al-'Uzzā. After the Battle of

Uḥud, the Quraysh leader stood boasting, 'We have al-'Uzzā, but you have no 'Uzzā', but the Prophet instructed his Companions to reply by saying: "God is our protecting Master, but you have no master to protect you." It is thought that the name al-'Uzzā was the feminine form of God's name, *al-'Azīz,* meaning the Almighty.

Manāt was stationed at a place called al-Mushallal in Qadīd, between Makkah and Madīnah. The tribes of Khuzā'ah, al-Aws and al-Khazraj used to venerate it in their pre-Islamic days, and used to start their pilgrimage from there.

There were many other idols venerated by different tribes, but these three were the major ones. It is thought that these idols were symbols representing angels whom the Arabs considered to be female and who they also claimed to be God's daughters. Hence, why they were originally worshipped. What happens in such cases is that the original idea is lost and the symbol becomes, for the majority of people, the thing to be worshipped. Only a handful of knowledgeable people continue to remember the original legend.

God mentions these three worshipped objects, implying in the very question He asks that to worship such things is indeed singular: "*Have you considered al-Lāt and al-'Uzzā, and Manāt, the third other?"* (Verses 19–20) Such singularity is clearly highlighted in His starting the question with, '*have you considered*', and in describing Manāt as '*the third other*'. After this initial question, He then adds that their other claim that He had daughters while they had sons was even more singular: "*Are you to have the male and He the female? That would then be an unfair division.*" (Verses 21–22) This suggests that these worshipped objects related to the legend that the angels were females, begotten by God – far more exalted is God above all such false claims. This confirms what we have said about those Arabs: they hated that they should beget females, but were not ashamed to make the angels, about whom they knew nothing, females and to allege that they were God's offspring. God questions them here on the basis of their own concepts, ridiculing these and whoever upholds them: "*Are you to have the male and He the female?*" Such a division you make between yourselves and God is most unfair!

The whole thing is based on illusion. It has no basis in human knowledge or in reality. No evidence or argument can be given in

support of such claims: "*These are nothing but names which you have invented – you and your forefathers – for which God has given no authority. They [who disbelieve] follow nothing but surmise and the whims of their own souls, even though right guidance from their Lord has now come to them.*" (Verse 23) These names, al-Lāt, al-'Uzzā, Manāt, and all others like them, which are called deities, angels, female and God's daughters, are false and cannot be substantiated. God has given you no evidence in support of such claims. What God does not sanction is certainly false and insupportable. It carries no weight.

This address to the unbelievers ends in the middle of the verse. The *sūrah* turns away from them as if they were not even there. Indeed, it speaks of them in the third person: "*They follow nothing but surmise and the whims of their own souls.*" (Verse 23) They lack argument, fact and certainty. They base their beliefs on surmise, and turn to their whims for evidence. Faith, however, cannot be based on either surmise or whim. True faith must be based on certainty and irrefutable evidence, without reference to whim or desire. The unbelievers had no excuse to justify their following whim and surmise: "*Even though right guidance from their Lord has now come to them.*" (Verse 23) When the deciding factor is one's own whim and desire, nothing can be right, and no guidance is of any use. The problem is not the absence of truth or evidence supporting it; the problem is a powerful desire that wants certain things, seeking justification for what it wants. This is the worst situation man can find himself in, because then no guidance is of any benefit and no proof is convincing.

Hence the *sūrah* disapprovingly asks: "*Is man to have all that he may wish for?*" (Verse 24) Will everything man wishes come true, have reality? Things are not like that. Truth and reality are different from wishful thinking, which cannot change facts. The fact is that man errs when he follows his own desires. He is too weak to change the nature of things. Everything in this life and the next belongs to God who accomplishes whatever He wills in both worlds: "*Both the life to come and this present life belong to God alone.*" (Verse 25)

We note here that the life to come is mentioned first, ahead of the present life, in order to maintain the rhyme. However, this gives an intended connotation, signifying that the life to come is more

important. This is normal in the Qur'ān, where the meaning fits well with the beat and the rhyme, allowing neither aspect to overshadow the other. This applies to everything of God's making throughout the universe, where beauty is maintained in harmony with the fulfilment of the function.

Since everything belongs to God in both this world and the life to come, there can be no basis for the unbelievers' conjectures that their false deities can intercede with God on their behalf. They used to say: "*We worship them for no reason other than that they would bring us nearer to God.*" (39: 3) Such conjecture is baseless. None of the angels in heaven can intercede with God except when God grants them permission to do so: "*Numerous are the angels in the heavens, yet their intercession will avail nothing until God has given leave to whomever He wills and with whom He is pleased.*" (Verse 26)

Having been proved in the previous verses to be false, their claims now fall apart. All fallacy and doubt is now removed from faith. Everything in this world and the following one belongs to God. Whims and desires cannot change reality. Intercession can only be accepted by God's leave. The final judgement is His alone.

At the end of this section, a final discussion is given of the unbelievers' false concepts about the angels, showing them to be baseless: "*Those who do not believe in the life to come give the angels female names. Yet of this they have no knowledge. They follow nothing but surmise, but surmise can never take the place of truth.*" (Verses 27–28) This final comment implicitly refers to the link between al-Lāt, al-'Uzzā and Manāt and the legend that makes angels female and that further alleges that they belong to God. This whole legend lacks all foundation. The unbelievers had no means whatsoever to learn anything true about the nature of the angels. As for the angels being God's offspring, this is a fallacy, ingrained in their false surmise, which can never be a substitute for the truth.

The Attitude to Take

At this point, the *sūrah* addresses the Prophet. It directs him to ignore such people and turn away from them, leaving their fate to God. He knows the ones who do well and those who do badly, and it is He who

requites both those who follow His guidance and those who remain in error. He is the One who controls the universe, this life and the life to come. He is the One who deals in absolute justice, wronging no one, forgiving sins that are not persisted with. He knows everyone's intentions and inner thoughts, as He is the Creator of mankind who knows everyone's reality at every stage and at every moment:

> *So, ignore those who turn away from Our message and care only for the life of this world. Such is the sum of their knowledge. Your Lord knows best who strays from His path, and He knows best who follows right guidance. Indeed, to God belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth. He will requite those who do evil in accordance with what they did, and will reward those who do good with what is best. As for those who avoid grave sins and shameful deeds, apart from casual indulgence, your Lord is abounding in forgiveness. He is fully aware of you when He brings you into being out of the earth, and when you are still hidden in your mothers' wombs. Do not, then, assert your own goodness. He knows best those who are truly God-fearing.* (Verses 29–32)

This order to ignore those who turn away from God's message and remain preoccupied with this present life is directed in the first place to the Prophet. He should not concern himself with those unbelievers whose legends and attitudes have already been discussed in the *sūrah*. It is also directed at every Muslim who must adopt a similar attitude towards anyone who refuses to believe in God, focuses all his attention on this life, disbelieves in the life to come, considers the life of this world to be the ultimate goal and adopts a way of life based on this concept. Such people sever any relation between their consciences and belief in God, for it is He who holds them to account for their deeds after the end of their time on earth. Those who are nearest to this description in our time are those who advocate materialistic creeds.

Someone who believes in God and in the life to come cannot afford to give much thought to, let alone interact with, anyone who turns away from God's message and who discards the life to come altogether. Their ways of life are so different that they cannot meet over a single point. All their standards, values and goals in life are in disagreement.

Therefore, the two cannot cooperate or collaborate in any activity. With such being the case, why should a believer concern himself with the one who turns away from God and His message? To do so is to waste effort and energy.

Moreover, to ignore them is to put them low. No matter what sort of people they are, the ones who do not believe in God and have no preoccupation other than this present life cannot see the truth or understand it. They stand behind the walls of this present life. It represents the total sum of their knowledge. It is a scanty little sum even though it may appear substantial; narrow even if it appears vast; leading into error even though it seems enlightened. A person whose feelings, heart and mind are confined to this earth, despite the fact that we see with our eyes a huge world beyond, cannot know anything of value. This huge world we see has not created itself, and the possibility of its just coming into existence must automatically be rejected by human logic. Since it has a Creator, it could not have existed as a pastime. To say that this present life is the be all and end all of this huge universe is to indulge in triviality. When we understand the true nature of this universe, whatever angle we look at it from, we will inevitably believe in the Creator, and also in the life to come. The supreme Creator who originated this huge universe does not engage in trivialities.

Therefore, it is imperative that we should ignore those who turn away from God's message and limit themselves to the confines of this present life. For one thing, ignoring them will ensure that we care only for those who deserve to be cared for. Moreover, it puts in the right place those whose knowledge does not go beyond the present life. We are commanded to do so, and God's command must be obeyed.

"*Your Lord knows best who strays from His path, and He knows best who follows right guidance.*" (Verse 30) He knew that those people were in error. Therefore, He did not wish for his Messenger and those who follow His guidance to preoccupy themselves with the conditions of those in error, nor to befriend and associate with them. They must not be deceived by appearances that show their scanty and erroneous knowledge as great, for all such knowledge is confined to this world and prevents man from appreciating the truth that leads to believing in God and the life to come.

Errant and deviant people may acquire knowledge that appears to be great in the eyes of the masses. They may think such knowledge to have far-reaching effects in this present life. Yet possessing such knowledge does not alter the fact that they are in error, ignorant and have impaired understanding. The bond between the universe and its Creator and the link between man's action and reward are two aspects of truth that are necessary for anyone with true knowledge. Without these two truths any knowledge remains superficial. It has neither a real effect on human life, nor does it help its progress. The value of knowledge is measured by its effect on the human soul and people's moral relations. Otherwise, such knowledge produces nothing other than progress in machines and retrogression in human values. And knowledge that promotes machines at the expense of humans is miserable indeed.

A man who feels that his Creator created the universe according to a single, coherent law will inevitably find his attitude to life and all he sees around him influenced by this. He, thus, realizes that his existence has a higher objective than his own immediate life, because it is interlinked with the existence of the universe. He begins to look at himself in a different light. He will see himself as bigger than his own self with his limited lifespan. He will see himself as greater than his family with its few individuals, then of his community, country and class. He is at a higher level than all these formations.

To realize that he must submit an account to his Creator on the Day of Judgement when God will requite him for his deeds is bound to alter man's concepts, methods of evaluation, motives and goals. It will also provide a clear link between his moral sense and his destiny, for he will recognize that his salvation is dependent on how his moral values influence his actions. This is bound to strengthen and enhance his moral sense, making him stronger and better able to control his actions. He has now a watchful inner guard, keeping an eye on the final reckoning in the hereafter. Besides, he is reassured that goodness will eventually triumph, even if it appears to lose some rounds in the battle that takes place on earth. It is his duty to always support what is good and strive for its triumph, even though he himself may suffer defeat. The final outcome is not in this life on earth; it is there, with the final reckoning, in that most certain life to come.

This question of belief in God and in the Day of Judgement is of immense importance. As a human need, it is more important than food, drink and clothing. With it, man's humanity is assured, but without it, man is just another animal.

When standards, goals and life concepts are so different between believers and unbelievers, there can be no partnership, friendship, interaction or serious dealings. There can be nothing between one who believes in God and another whose preoccupation with this present life makes him turn away from God's message. To say anything different is to indulge in futile argument and to disobey God's clear order: "*Ignore those who turn away from Our message and care only for the life of this world.*" (Verse 29)

What Requital for Man

> *Indeed, to God belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth. He will requite those who do evil in accordance with what they did, and will reward those who do good with what is best.* (Verse 31)

This statement, emphasizing God's full ownership of the heavens and earth, gives the question of the hereafter added strength and greater influence. The One who determines the life to come and its timing is the One to whom the heavens and earth belong. Only He is able to administer reward, and to ensure that it is administered with full justice for all: "*He will requite those who do evil in accordance with what they did, and will reward those who do good with what is best.*" (Verse 31)

The *sūrah* then defines the ones who do good, earning a reward according to what is best. They are the ones "*who avoid grave sins and shameful deeds, apart from casual indulgence.*" (Verse 32) Grave sins are cardinal, and shameful deeds are those sins that represent serious transgression. Scholars differ as to the meaning of the Arabic word *lamam*, translated here as casual indulgence.

Ibn Kathīr says that the exception indicated by the phrase, *apart from*, is unrelated, meaning that what follows it does not relate to what comes before it, because to him *lamam* means trivial sin. Imām Aḥmad quotes Ibn 'Abbās as saying: "Nothing defines *lamam* better than the hadith

quoting the Prophet as saying, 'Everyone will inevitably have his share of fornication: the eye fornicates with glances, the tongue with words, and the mind with thoughts and desire; and ultimately one confirms all this going the whole way or discards it.'" [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] Al-Ṭabarī quotes Ibn Mas'ūd as saying: "The eye fornicates with glances, the lips with kissing, the hands with the use of force and the legs with walking. Ultimately one confirms all this with action going the whole way or not. If one goes the whole way, it is adultery, and if not then it is *lamam.*" Similar views are expressed by Masrūq and al-Sha'bī, who were prominent early scholars. Likewise, Abū Hurayrah is quoted as explaining *lamam* as "a kiss, a glance, a gesture and minor action. Should genitals meet, then that is adultery requiring a full bath."

All these views are similar, defining *lamam* as trivial sin. Other scholars, however, express different views. A report by Ibn 'Abbās and Zayd ibn Aslam defines it as, 'what was done in the past'. Mujāhid says that "*lamam* means a person committing a serious sin and then desisting from it". Al-Ṭabarī attributes to Ibn 'Abbās a report saying that *lamam* means "a man indulges in a grave sin then repents". He refers to a *ḥadīth* quoting the Prophet as saying: "If You forgive me, My Lord, then You will forgive much. Who of Your servants has not dipped into *lamam.*" Abū Hurayrah is also reported to have said in reference to this Qur'ānic statement, "*who avoid grave sins and shameful deeds, apart from casual indulgence*". (Verse 32): "This means a one-off indulgence in adultery then repentance with no repeat, or a one-off indulgence in stealing before repentance with no repeat, or a one-off indulgence in drinking then repentance with no repeat. Such is *lamam.*" A similar view is attributed to al-Ḥasan, an early prominent scholar.

On balance, I feel that this second view is more appropriate, as it fits better with the statement that follows in the same verse: "*Your Lord is abounding in forgiveness.*" (Verse 32) Describing God's forgiveness as abounding fits well with the view that *lamam* is a casual indulgence in such grave sins and shameful conduct, followed by sincere and genuine repentance. This means that the definition the *sūrah* gives of those '*who do good*' means that they are the ones who '*avoid grave sins and shameful deeds,*' unless they slip, but repent soon after and refrain from repeating such sins. In another *sūrah*, God speaks of the 'God-fearing',

defining them as "*Those who, when they commit a gross indecency or wrong themselves, remember God and pray for the forgiveness of their sins – for who but God can forgive sins? – and do not knowingly persist in doing the wrong they may have done.*" (3: 135) He promises to reward them with forgiveness and admittance into a "*paradise as vast as the heavens and the earth.*" (3: 133) This is indeed more in line with the concept of God's mercy being ever present and far extending, and of His forgiveness being abounding.

The verse concludes by the statement that God's requital of people's deeds is based on His knowledge of their inner thoughts throughout all stages of their lives: "*He is fully aware of you when He brings you into being out of the earth, and when you are still hidden in your mothers' wombs.*" (Verse 32) His knowledge, then, precedes their own actions, as it is the knowledge of their true nature which they themselves do not even know. It is known only to God, their Creator. This knowledge was present when God originated them from the earth before they were brought into existence, and when they were still in their mothers' wombs, before they were brought into the light. It is the knowledge of their truth before it takes physical shape, and of their nature before it translates into action.

When we think of God's knowledge in this way, we realize that it is pointless, and indeed impudent for a man to tell Him about himself, trying to press his good points: "*Do not, then, assert your own goodness. He knows best those who are truly God-fearing.*" (Verse 32) He does not need for you to tell Him about yourselves, or to suggest how your deeds measure up. His knowledge is perfect, His measure accurate, His reward just, His judgement final, and to Him all creatures return.

On Their Own

The *sūrah* moves now to its final part which maintains the same rhythm as the first part. It states the basic concept of divine faith, as it has been ever since the time of Abraham, who delivered the first full code for living. It makes their Lord known to mankind. It shows them how His will influences their lives, portraying its effects one after another in a way that strongly shakes the human conscience. It builds its effect up

to the final beats, which are very powerful and are received with softened hearts and responsive minds.

> *Consider the one who turns away: he gives little at first then hardens and stops. Does he have knowledge of what lies beyond the reach of human perception so that he can clearly see? Has he never been told of what is written in the revelations given to Moses, and to Abraham who was true to his trust: that no soul shall bear the burden of another; that man will only have what he strives for; that his labour will be seen and he will be given the fullest reward for it; that with your Lord is the ultimate end; that it is He who causes [people] to laugh and weep; and it is He who deals death and gives life; that it is He who creates the two sexes, male and female, from a seed as it is lodged in place; that it is He who brings about a second life; that it is He who gives riches and possessions; that He is the Lord of Sirius; that it is He who destroyed the ancient 'Ād; and Thamūd, leaving no trace of them; as well as Noah's people before them, for these were truly most unjust and most overweening; that it is He who brought down the ruined cities enveloping them with whatever came over them. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you still doubt?*
>
> *This is a warning like those warnings given in former times. The imminent Hour draws ever nearer. None but God can remove it. Do you find this discourse strange? Do you laugh instead of weeping, and pay no heed? Prostrate yourselves before God and worship Him alone.* (Verses 33–62)

This passage begins with a reference to the one who turns away, giving little at first before stopping altogether. His attitude is strange and the *sūrah* wonders at him. Some reports suggest that these two short verses refer to a particular man who began by making a small donation for God's cause before stopping for fear of becoming poor. In his commentary on the Qur'ān, *Al-Kashshāf*, al-Zamakhsharī names this person as 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān, reporting a story which has no solid basis and will be dismissed as totally unreliable by anyone who knows even a little about 'Uthmān and his history of very generous donations for Islam and the Muslim community. Such donations never stopped

at any time during his life. He was a most devoted servant of Islam, with a strong and sound faith, and with good knowledge of the Islamic principles, particularly with regard to individual responsibility.[2]

It may be that this Qur'ānic statement refers to a particular case, but it is equally possible that it is speaking about a type, rather than an individual. Anyone who abandons this line, weakening after having come forward with effort and money in support of God's cause, invites amazement. The Qur'ān uses this example to present and clarify certain basic principles of the Islamic faith.

"*Does he have knowledge of what lies beyond the reach of human perception so that he can clearly see?*" (Verse 35) Knowledge of what lies beyond our perception belongs to God and can only be seen by Him. No man can fathom it. No one can be sure what turn events will take and what effect such a turn will have on him. Therefore, one must work tirelessly, doing one's best throughout one's life. It is wrong to stop doing what is good, because nothing guarantees a good turn in the future life better than good action now, in this present life, coupled with a hope to earn God's forgiveness and pleasure.

"*Has he never been told of what is written in the revelations given to Moses, and to Abraham who was true to his trust.*" (Verses 36–37) This religion goes far back in history, and its latest version is closely related to its oldest one, with both having the same fundamental principles and values. Its different parts are mutually complementary, despite the fact that there have been many messages and messengers, with wide gulfs separating them in time and place. It is embodied in the revelations given to Moses, and to Abraham before him. Abraham is singled out here as having been true to his trust. He fulfilled every assignment given to him. This quality of Abraham's is highlighted here to provide contrast with that of doing a little good first, then stopping altogether.

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2. The story mentions that 'Uthmān used to donate for good causes. 'Abdullāh ibn Sa'd, his brother through breast-feeding, i.e. one woman breast-fed them both when they were young, said to him: "If you continue at this rate, you will soon be without money." 'Uthmān said: "I committed sins, and I hope that what I am doing will earn me forgiveness by God." 'Abdullāh said: "Give me your she-camel, with its present load, and I will bear all your sins." He gave him that and called witnesses to solemnize the deal. He then stopped his donations. Therefore, these verses were revealed. This is the story, and it is clearly false. 'Uthmān could never have behaved in this way.

What do their revelations contain? The answer is clearly stated: "*That no soul shall bear the burden of another.*" (Verse 38) No one shall bear another's burden, making it heavier or lighter. Voluntary help is not acceptable in this respect.

"*That man will only have what he strives for.*" (Verse 39) Such is the rule. No one is to be credited with anything other than his own deeds. No man or woman will be given anything extra that someone else might have done; nor will anything be taken away so as to be credited to someone else. This present life is the chance given to all to work as they please. Once a person dies, the chance has gone. No further action can be credited, except as explained by the Prophet: "When a human being dies, his deeds come to a final end except in one of three ways: a continuing act of charity, a useful contribution to knowledge, and a dutiful child who prays for him." [Related by Muslim.] These three ways are, in essence, part of a person's own deeds:

> On this Qur'ānic verse, al-Shāfiʿī and other scholars base their view that reading the Qur'ān and requesting God to credit the reward for its recitation to the dead is not valid. They say that the reward for such a recitation will not be credited to a deceased person, because it is not his own deed. Therefore, the Prophet did not recommend it in any explicit or implicit way. Nor was this practised by any of the Prophet's Companions. Had it been valid, they would have done it before us. When we speak about virtuous actions earning reward, we must confine ourselves to what is expressly stated in the Qur'ān and the *aḥādīth*. We cannot rely on analogy or scholarly views. As for praying for the deceased and donating to charity on their behalf, these are unanimously agreed upon by scholars to be credited to them since they are expressly stated in authentic religious texts.[3]

"*That his labour will be seen and he will be given the fullest reward for it.*" (Verses 40–41) Nothing of a person's deeds will ever be lost, as nothing will be overlooked by Him. Every action, no matter how small,

3. Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Aẓīm*, Dār al-Ma'rifah, Beirut, 1987, Vol. 4, p. 276.

will be valued by God's fine and accurate measure so as to give everyone their full reward. No one will suffer even the slightest loss or injustice.

Thus, the principle of individual responsibility goes hand in hand with that of absolute justice for all. Man is thus given his full humanity based on his being a rational and responsible creature who can be trusted to look after himself. He is in a position of honour, given a chance to work for his future life and then submits his work for reckoning and reward. He is reassured that absolute justice will be done, as the reckoning is fair, unaffected by preferential treatment or oversight.

"*That with your Lord is the ultimate end.*" (Verse 42) The only road to follow is the one leading to Him. There is no refuge other than with Him, and no abode other than what He defines, in a place of bliss or one of suffering. This truth is extremely significant in shaping man's feelings and ideas. When man realizes that everything and everyone will ultimately end with God, he knows the inevitable outcome right from the beginning, and will try to determine his own actions in accordance with this truth. His heart and mind will remain, throughout his life journey, focused on the end he knows to be inevitable.

Life's Journey

Having given us a glimpse of the ultimate end, the *sūrah* takes us back to this life, showing us some aspects of the work of the divine will at every stage and in every situation: "*That it is He who causes [people] to laugh and weep.*" (Verse 43) These few words embody a number of facts and generate many inspiring images. It is God who gave man the two inner qualities of laughter and weeping. No one knows quite how they work in man's complex constitution, in which the psychology is as complex as the anatomy. Indeed, we realize that both psychological and physical factors closely interact to produce laughter or weeping.

It is God who causes man to laugh or weep, by creating what makes man laugh or weep. He makes man laugh in certain situations and weep in others according to the interplay of certain secret elements within him. Man may laugh tomorrow at what causes him to weep today, or may weep now because of something that made him laugh a short time

earlier. Yet this is due to no madness or absent-mindedness. It is merely the result of changing psychological conditions as influenced by a host of factors that affect our feelings and reactions.

God also makes different people laugh or weep at the same time, each according to different influences. Some may laugh at the very thing that makes others weep. Although the situation is the same, its circumstances and outcome give it widely different effects on people. Moreover, God causes the same person to laugh and weep at the same thing. He may react to something with laughter until its outcome becomes known to him when he cries. Then he wishes that he had not laughed or reacted in the way he had. Many are those who laugh in this present life only to find themselves weeping in the life to come when regret is of no use.

All these images, connotations, feelings and situations spring to mind as we read this short verse. More are generated as we gain further experience in life, and as causes of laughter and weeping come into play. This is one more aspect of the miraculous nature of the Qur'ān.

"*And it is He who deals death and gives life.*" (Verse 44) Likewise, this short verse gives rise to endless images. It is God who initiates life and death. In another *sūrah*, we read that God "*has created death and life.*" (67: 2) Both are well known to man as they always occur, but both are deeply hidden when man tries to fathom their nature. What is death; what is life? What answers do we get when we try to understand them further than the two words and the two apparent conditions imply? How does life start in a living thing? Where does it come from; and how does it go into something to make it alive? How does it progress, taking this living thing with it on its way? What is death; how does it happen before the start of life, and after its departure from living things? It is all a deep secret hidden beyond thick curtains that God's hand has drawn.

It is God who deals death and gives life. As we listen, there appear before us millions of images of life and death, in all living worlds, all at the same moment. Consider how many millions upon millions of living things have died at this moment in time! Consider also how many millions upon millions have started their life's journeys, with life springing into them from where neither they nor anyone else, apart from God, knows! How many deaths have occurred at this moment, yet they themselves give rise to life? Now let us stretch our minds to

past generations: how many have lived and died across endless centuries before human life started on this planet? We will not say anything about other types of life and death elsewhere in the universe. No human mind can ever imagine these.

These few words give rise to endless images that shake man to the core. Inevitably, he is profoundly influenced by their rhythm and widely ranging echoes.

A Sperm and Two Sexes

"*That it is He who creates the two sexes, male and female, from a seed as it is lodged in place.*" (Verses 45–46) This is a fact of momentous significance, even though man is oblivious to it because he sees it taking place all the time. It is indeed greater than the most amazing thing human imagination can ever produce. A seed is discharged. It is merely one of many types of discharge the human body makes, such as sweat, tears, mucous, etc. Then after a certain period determined by God, this discharge becomes something different. It becomes a human being, either male or female. How does this miracle happen? Had we not seen it happen, it would not have even entered our imaginations or crossed our minds. Where was this human being, with its very sophisticated and complex constitution? Where was it lodged in that little drop of semen, or indeed in one of the millions of its sperms? Look at the bones, flesh, skin, veins, hair, nails, distinctive features, characteristics, potentials and moods of a human being, and think: where was all that hidden in a single microscopic cell floating, like millions similar to it, in a drop of liquid that a man discharges? Where in particular are lodged the characteristics of male and female in that single cell?

What human mind can contemplate this great fact and continue to arrogantly argue that it all just happens in this way, or that it just learnt to move in this line? Indeed, some people try to posit a seemingly enlightened argument, saying that the sperm acts in this way because, like all living things, it has the ability of reproduction. This is a circular argument, one that gives an explanation but needs an explanation itself. Who gave the sperm this potential? Who placed into it the latent desire to preserve its kind through reproduction? Weak and tiny as the sperm

is, who made it able to reproduce its kind? Who charted its journey so as to make it proceed with its task in such a well-defined way as to fulfil its desire of reproduction? Indeed, who gave it all the characteristics of its kind so as to reproduce them all? Moreover, why should it wish to reproduce its kind, and what interest is there for this sperm to reproduce all the characteristics of its kind? Can there be any other answer to all these questions other than a wise will that has a certain design for a certain objective, and that this will is able to fulfil its design and achieve its objective?

Having stated this first initiation of man, which is a continuously repeated event that no one denies, the *sūrah* moves directly to the second: "*That it is He who brings about a second life.*" (Verse 47) This second life belongs to the realm that is beyond our perception, but the first initiation provides ample evidence of its possibility. The One who created the two sexes from a single seed can easily bring life back to bones and other remains. Such bones and dust are no way less than an ejaculated seed as production material. Moreover, the first initiation provides evidence of the wisdom behind a second life. The subtle, yet elaborate planning that leads the tiny living cell along its arduous way until it becomes a male or a female must have a goal beyond this journey on earth in which nothing is complete and where people do not receive full reward or requital for their good or evil actions. This elaborate planning has made it thus because it includes a second life, which brings everything to its fullness. We see that the first initiation gives double evidence of the second life. Hence, it is mentioned first.

In both lives, God bestows riches on whomever He wills of His servants: "*That it is He who gives riches and possessions.*" (Verse 48) Many and diverse are the types of riches God grants to His servants in this world: wealth, health, offspring, contentedness, happiness, feeling, thought as well as the unique feeling of richness generated by feeling one's bond with God. He also bestows riches of the life to come on whomever He wills. Furthermore, He gives those He chooses possessions in plenty both in this life and the next. Human beings are poor, penniless. They cannot become rich and own things unless God grants them whatever He is pleased to grant them out of His treasures. They all know this and look up to Him for more, realizing that He is

the only source. They know that His treasures are the ones that are full and endless, while everything else is empty.

"*That He is the Lord of Sirius.*" (Verse 49) Sirius is a star that is 20 times heavier than the sun, gives 50 times the light the sun gives, and is a million times further away from us than the sun. Some people used to worship Sirius, and some used to watch it in particular, feeling that it had special importance. Therefore, stating that God is the Lord of Sirius is most fitting in this *sūrah*, which starts with an oath by the star as it sets, and speaks about the journey to the high heavens, focusing in all this on God's oneness and showing the fallacy of associating partners with Him.

The Communities of Old

> *That it is He who destroyed the ancient 'Ād; and Thamūd, leaving no trace of them; as well as Noah's people before them, for these were truly most unjust and most overweening; that it is He who brought down the ruined cities enveloping them with whatever came over them. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you still doubt?* (Verses 50–55)

This is a quick round, with a short pause placed where the fate of each of those old communities is mentioned, coupled with a sharp touch with which we are certain to interact. The 'Ād, Thamūd and people of Noah are well known to the reader of the Qur'ān, as they are mentioned several times in this divine book. The ruined cities are those of Lot's people who were immersed in sin and went far astray. Their cities were turned upside down, but their fate is left vague here, '*enveloping them with whatever came over them,*' to add a feeling of suspense through which we see images of ruins upon ruins, leaving nothing clear or identifiable.

"*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you still doubt?*" (Verse 55) The calamities that befell those communities were blessings then. Did they not lead to the destruction of evil? Were they not events that hurled the truth over falsehood to make it disappear? Did they not leave signs for everyone to reflect upon? These are certainly blessings. Hence why should people still doubt them? The address here is to every heart and

mind which reflect on what God does and which see the blessing even when the event is one of calamity.

The *sūrah* now delivers its final beat, one that is profound and powerful. It is an outcry alerting us to the great, looming danger: "*This is a warning like those warnings given in former times. The imminent Hour draws ever nearer. None but God can remove it.*" (Verses 56–58) This Messenger whom you doubt and who you argue about with the warnings he gives you is just like those warnings of old. When they were taken lightly, they were followed with well-known events. The imminent Hour is now close, it will sweep everything before it. It is the one that will envelop and strike all that this Messenger has been warning you about. Alternatively, the warning mentioned in the verse refers to the subject of the warning, or rather the suffering that may be inflicted. Its nature and timing are known only to God. When it takes place none but God can lift it: "*None but God can remove it.*"

The danger is now very close to you, and the compassionate warner is calling on you to save yourselves, but you are deeply indulged, paying no attention, oblivious of what is about to engulf you: "*Do you find this discourse strange? Do you laugh instead of weeping, and pay no heed?*" (Verses 59–61) This discourse is great and serious, defining heavy responsibilities for people while also providing them with a complete code for living. Why should they find it strange? Why should they laugh when it is given in all seriousness? The responsibilities it outlines and the fact that people will have to give full accounts of what they do in life put them in a situation that should invite weeping rather than laughter.

Now the *sūrah* ends with a loud command that strikes both their ears and hearts, telling them what they should do to save themselves from the abyss at the edge of which they perilously stand: "*Prostrate yourselves before God and worship Him alone.*" (Verse 62) Coming after such a discourse creating immense influences, this command struck awe in their hearts and they prostrated themselves as commanded. These idolaters, who endlessly argued about the Qur'ān and revelation, and about God and His message, prostrated themselves at this point. All the people listening to the Prophet reciting this *sūrah* felt its strong beat like a blacksmith's hammer. All of them, Muslims and unbelievers alike, saw the Prophet prostrating himself at its end and they did likewise.

They could not resist the power of the Qur'ān or question its authority. When they came to, they were stunned as they realized what they had just done.

There are numerous reports describing this event. While they are all unanimous about its details, they differ in explaining what appears to be a strange happening. In fact, though, it is not strange at all. It is an example of the effect the Qur'ān produces and how hearts interact with it.

A Fabricated Story

To me, this event of unbelievers prostrating themselves before God, alongside the Muslims, needed an explanation. However, an experience I went through clarified for me its true reasons.

I used to read the false reports of what is known as the 'story of the birds' concerning this event. These are given by Ibn Sa'd in his *Al-Ṭabaqāt*, Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī in his book on history, and by some commentators on the Qur'ān as they speak in detail about the verse that says: "*Whenever We sent forth a messenger or a prophet before you, and he was hoping for something, Satan would throw some aspersion on his wishes. But God renders null and void whatever aspersion Satan may cast; and God makes His messages clear in and by themselves. God is All-knowing, Wise.*" (22: 52) Ibn Kathīr gives the following comment on these reports: "They are all lacking in authenticity. I did not find any of them to have a sound chain of transmission."

The most detailed of these reports and the least in fabrication is the one given by Ibn Abī Ḥātim:

> Prior to the revelation of *Sūrah* 53, The Star, the unbelievers used to say: 'If only this man [meaning the Prophet] would speak in a good way about our deities, we would approve of him and his followers. Unfortunately, he speaks of our deities in a more derogatory way than he speaks of others who differ with him, such as the Jews and the Christians. The Prophet was deeply hurt by what the unbelievers inflicted on him and his Companions, causing them much harm and accusing him of lying. He was saddened by their stubborn rejection of his message, and was eager that they should

follow divine guidance. When God revealed to him *Sūrah* 53, The Star, and he read the verses saying, '*Have you considered al-Lāt and al-'Uzzā, and Manāt, the third other?*' Satan threw some words at the mention of these idols, adding after their names the following couplet: 'These are exalted birds, whose intercession is desirable.' This rhyming couplet was of Satan's doing. Yet it went into the heart of every unbeliever in Makkah and they repeated it to one another, claiming that Muḥammad had reverted to his people's religion. However the Prophet continued to recite the *sūrah* to the end, when he prostrated himself, as did all those present, believers and unbelievers. The only exception was al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah, who was an old man. He took a handful of dust from the earth in his hand and put his forehead on it in a gesture of prostration.

Both parties were amazed at the fact that the unbelievers prostrated themselves when the Prophet did so. The Muslims, who did not hear Satan's words to the unbelievers, wondered how the unbelievers would prostrate themselves when they did not believe. The unbelievers were happy at the words Satan added, making them feel that the Prophet read them, and considered that their prostration was in acknowledgement of the praise given to their deities. This quickly circulated among people and Satan helped to spread it further until it reached Abyssinia where a large number of the early Muslims had migrated. On hearing of what happened, these Muslims in Abyssinia thought that the people of Makkah had all accepted Islam and prayed with the Prophet. They also heard that al-Walīd prostrated himself on his own palm. They felt that Makkah was now a safe place for Islam and its followers. Therefore some of them began to return.

God, however, rendered the aspersion cast by Satan as null and void, making His message clear in itself and by itself, and preserving His Messenger from the fabricated lie. He also revealed the verse saying: "*Whenever We sent forth a messenger or a prophet before you, and he was hoping for something, Satan would throw some aspersion on his wishes...*" (22: 52) When God confirmed His word, the unbelievers reverted to their practices of determined hostility, increasing their pressure on the believers.

Other reports go even further in fabricating lies, attributing those words about 'exalted birds' to the Prophet himself, justifying this by his desire to come to some arrangement with the Quraysh. Far be it for the Prophet (peace be upon him) to try to appease unbelievers.

Right from the outset, I rejected all these reports. For one thing, they go against the facts of the Prophet's infallibility and the preservation of the Qur'ān by God, keeping it immune from any distortion. The very flow of the *sūrah* makes such an addition absolutely impossible. In its entirety, the *sūrah* shows the fallacy of the idolaters' belief in those deities and the legends they weave around them. How can such a couplet of praise for them be inserted into such refutation? Even if we consider the argument of some who say that the couplet was heard only by the unbelievers, but not by the believers, it still remains unacceptable. Those unbelievers were Arabs who had a fine sense of their own language. How would they have felt had they heard this false couplet, followed by the verses stating: "*Are you to have the male and He the female? That would then be an unfair division. These are nothing but names which you have invented – you and your forefathers – for which God has given no authority.*" (Verses 21–23) Shortly afterwards they would have heard the verses: "*Those who do not believe in the life to come give the angels female names. Yet of this they have no knowledge. They follow nothing but surmise, but surmise can never take the place of truth.*" (Verses 27–28) And these are even preceded by the verse: "*Numerous are the angels in the heavens, yet their intercession will avail nothing until God has given leave to whomever He wills and with whom He is pleased.*" (Verse 26) Had those Arabs, endowed as they were with a fine sense of language, heard this sequence after a supposed couplet praising their idols and confirming that they can intercede with God, they would not have prostrated themselves, because the whole context would have been flawed and crooked. Those Arabs were not as stupid as the fabricators of these reports, to which Orientalists tried to give credence, either out of ignorance or to serve a purpose of their own.

The prostration by the unbelievers had, then, a reason other than this fabricated story. Likewise the return of some immigrants from Abyssinia was for a different reason. This is not the occasion to establish the reason for their return. Instead, we will only concentrate here on the question of the unbelievers' prostration.

A Personal Experience

I spent some time trying to discover the reason for this prostration. I even considered the possibility that it did not take place, and that it was rather a report explaining the return of the immigrants from Abyssinia. It was during this time, however, that I had the experience to which I referred earlier and will now recount.

We were a group of friends passing an evening together when we heard a recitation of the Qur'ān nearby. The reciter, who had an inspiring voice and a fine recitation, was reading this *sūrah*, The Star. Conversation between us ceased as we listened to the Qur'ān. Gradually, I began to feel what the reciter was reading deeply in my heart. I lived with him and felt how the Prophet went on this journey to join the community on high. I lived with him as he saw Gabriel in his angelic form God had created. That was a most remarkable event to contemplate. I reflected on his journey to the world beyond, to the tree at the farthest limit, and to the garden of abode in heaven. I lived all this, as far as my imagination could stretch, and my feelings bear. I followed him as the legends weaved by the idolaters about the angels, and how they worshipped them alleging that they were God's daughters, were shattered at the first touch of reality. I reflected on how a human being is brought into being out of the earth and how it becomes an embryo in its mother's womb, and how each of us is watched by God throughout our life's journey.

I felt a shiver as the reciter began the last part of the *sūrah*, referring to the world beyond the reach of our perception and known only to God; the actions recorded in full and accurate detail so that nothing is lost at the time of reckoning; the fact that all journeys end with God; the multitudes that laugh and the multitudes that cry; the dead and the living in countless numbers; the human seed as it finds its way in the dark before it begins to show its secrets revealing whether it is a male or a female; the second creation; the fate of past communities and the ruined cities of Lot's people as they were enveloped with whatever covered them.

I listened attentively to the last warning before the impending calamity: "*This is a warning like those warnings given in former times. The imminent Hour draws ever nearer. None but God can remove it.*" (Verses 56–58) I then heard the last cry and felt all my body and soul

trembling: "*Do you find this discourse strange? Do you laugh instead of weeping, and pay no heed?*" (Verses 59–61) When the reciter read the final verse, "*Prostrate yourselves before God and worship Him alone,*" the trembling was no longer only in my heart; it had spread to my whole body and took physical shape, which I could not resist. All my body was quivering and I could neither stop the quivering nor prevent my tears from pouring.

I realized then that the prostration by all those who were listening to the Prophet as he recited this *sūrah* was correct, and that its explanation is easy. Its secret is contained in the powerful effect the Qur'ān has on people and in particular the powerful rhythm this *sūrah* carries. It was not the first time I had read or listened to this *sūrah*, but on that particular occasion it had this effect on me, causing such a response. This is one of the secrets of the Qur'ān: there are special moments, which cannot be anticipated, when a verse or a *sūrah* touches special cords within us to establish direct contact with our hearts. The result is that we are profoundly affected by what we read or listen to.

One such moment touched the hearts of all present as the Prophet recited this *sūrah*, putting all his heart feelings into its recitation, living again all its images which he had already seen with his eyes. All the power in this *sūrah* poured forth from his recitation to touch the hearts of the audience, and they trembled and quivered. When they heard, "*Prostrate yourselves before God and worship Him alone,*" Muḥammad and the Muslims present prostrated themselves. The unbelievers could only follow suit, and so prostrated themselves.

Someone may say to me that I am basing my argument on a personal experience at a certain moment. Furthermore, I am a Muslim who believes in the Qur'ān and feels its special effect, while those others were idolaters, rejecting God's message and denying the Qur'ān. In reply I point out two considerations. The first is that the reciter in their case was Muḥammad, the Prophet, (peace be upon him). He had received the Qur'ān directly from its source and took heart from it, living every moment of his life with it. He loved the Qur'ān so much that when he heard a person reading it in his home, he would walk slowly and listen attentively at the door until the reciter had finished. As this particular *sūrah* was read, he was re-living an experience he had gone through

on high, and with the Holy Spirit as he saw him in his original form. I was listening to a fellow man reciting it, and the difference between the two cases is vast.

The second consideration is that those idolaters were not immune to trembling when they listened to Muḥammad (peace be upon him). It was their affected stubbornness that prevented them from acknowledging the truth. The following two cases provide enough evidence of their shaking and trembling when they listened to the Qur'ān.

In his biographical note on 'Utbah ibn Abī Lahab, Ibn 'Asākir reports on the authority of Hannād ibn al-Aswad:

> Both Abū Lahab and his son 'Utbah were preparing to travel to Syria, and I also was preparing to go with them. 'Utbah said: "I will go to Muḥammad and say some harsh words about his God." He went to Muḥammad and said to him that he would never believe in the one who '*drew near, and came close, until he was two bow-lengths away, or even closer.*' The Prophet said: 'My Lord! Set on him one of your dogs.' 'Utbah then left him and returned to his father who asked him what Muḥammad's reaction was and 'Utbah reported the Prophet's prayer. Abū Lahab said: 'Son, I really fear for you the effect of his prayer.' Then we set on our way until we stopped at Abrāh where we went into a monk's hermitage. The monk asked us: 'What makes you stop at this place where lions are as plentiful as cats?' Then Abū Lahab said to us: 'You know that I am your eldest and I have certain rights. You also know that this man prayed against my son and I fear what may happen to him as a result. Therefore, bring all your things into the hermitage and put it in the middle, laying my son's blanket on top of it. Then spread your blankets all around it.' We did as he asked us. During the night, a lion came in and smelled all our faces. When he did not find what he wanted, he pulled himself together and leapt landing on top of our things. He smelled 'Utbah's face before hitting him and breaking his head. Abū Lahab said: 'I knew that Muḥammad's prayer was certain to catch up with him.'

The first case documented above mentions Abū Lahab, one of the Prophet's most vehement opponents who used to set people against

him. He is the one the Qur'ān specifically condemns: "*Doomed are the hands of Abū Lahab; doomed is he. His wealth and his gains shall avail him nothing. He shall have to endure a flaming fire, and his wife, the carrier of firewood, shall have a rope of palm fibre round her neck.*" (111: 1–5) We see in this report his true feeling about Muḥammad and what he said. We see his profound fear that Muḥammad's prayer against his son would inevitably come true.

The second case refers to 'Utbah ibn Rabī'ah, one the Quraysh chiefs and its representative who tried to negotiate a deal with the Prophet. He suggested that the Prophet should stop his advocacy that led to division among the people and stop criticizing their beliefs. In return they would give him whatever he asked for in money, position and women. When he stated his offer, the Prophet said to him: 'Have you, Abū al-Walīd, finished what you want to say?' When he affirmed that he had finished, the Prophet said: 'Then listen to this that I want to read to you.' The Prophet then started to recite from the beginning of *Sūrah* 41: "*A revelation from the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful: a book, the verses of which have been clearly spelled out as a discourse in Arabic for people of knowledge. It gives good news as well as a warning. Yet, most of them turn away, so that they do not hear.*" (41: 1–4) He continued his recitation until he read Verse 13 which says: "*If they turn away, say: 'I warn you of a thunderbolt like the thunderbolt that struck the 'Ād and Thamūd.'*" At this point, 'Utbah sprang to his feet, put his hand on the Prophet's mouth and was full of terror as he said to the Prophet: "I appeal to you by all ties of kinship not to do so." He then went back to his people, reported on his mission and concluded by saying: "You, the Quraysh people, know that Muḥammad never lies. I feared that a terrible fate might befall you."

Such was the reaction of someone who never accepted Islam. Yet he clearly trembled even though his stubbornness got the better of him, preventing him from acting on what he knew to be true. When people like these listen to this *sūrah*, The Star, being recited by Muḥammad (peace be upon him), then they are very likely to experience a moment of total response which they cannot control. They will submit to the power of the Qur'ān and prostrate themselves with the believers. So let all fabricated stories, like that of the interceding birds, be dumped firmly in the rubbish bin.

SŪRAH 54

Al-Qamar

(The Moon)

Prologue

From start to finish, this *sūrah* represents an awesome onslaught against those who deny the warnings, but gives at the same time confident reassurance to the believers. It is divided into a series of scenes, each showing a different type of suffering inflicted on a community of unbelievers who denied God's messages. Each culminates with a violent shaking of the human heart, as it asks: "*How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings!*" It then lets go, saying: "*We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed?*"

The themes tackled in this *sūrah* are discussed in many *sūrahs* of Makkan revelation. It begins with a scene from the Day of Judgement and ends with a similar scene. In between, the *sūrah* dwells briefly on the fates of Noah's people, the 'Ād, Thamūd, Lot's people and Pharaoh and his followers. All these are tackled in different ways in other *sūrahs*. Yet all these issues are presented here in a special way, making them appear totally new. Here we see each episode as violent, tempestuous, spreading fear, engendering collapse and a sweeping destruction.

The *sūrah*'s main characteristic is that each scene paints a fast episode of punishment presented to those who deny the divine faith. They feel that they personally are involved in it, witnessing the punishment and enduring its pain. When one scene is over and listeners begin to breathe

again, a new and more awesome scene of punishment is presented to them. When seven such episodes in this suffocating and fearful atmosphere are completed, the last image is presented, providing us with a totally different aura, delivering pleasant shades of security, serenity and reassurance. It shows us the righteous and their destiny: "*The God-fearing will be in gardens and running waters, in a seat of truth, in the presence of an all-powerful Sovereign.*" (Verses 54–55) How different is this from the condition of the unbelievers who are also told of their fate: "*On the day when they are dragged into the fire, their faces down, [they will be told], 'Taste now the touch of hell-fire.'*" (Verse 48)

Al-Qamar (The Moon)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

The Last Hour draws near, and the moon is split asunder. (1)

ٱقْتَرَبَتِ ٱلسَّاعَةُ وَٱنشَقَّ ٱلْقَمَرُ ١

Yet when the unbelievers see a sign, they turn away and say, 'Yet another act of continuous sorcery.' (2)

وَإِن يَرَوْا۟ ءَايَةً يُعْرِضُوا۟ وَيَقُولُوا۟ سِحْرٌ مُّسْتَمِرٌّ ٢

They deny the truth and follow their own desires. Yet everything is ultimately settled. (3)

وَكَذَّبُوا۟ وَٱتَّبَعُوٓا۟ أَهْوَآءَهُمْ ۚ وَكُلُّ أَمْرٍ مُّسْتَقِرٌّ ٣

There has come to them tidings that should have restrained [their arrogance], (4)

وَلَقَدْ جَآءَهُم مِّنَ ٱلْأَنۢبَآءِ مَا فِيهِ مُزْدَجَرٌ ٤

far-reaching wisdom, but warnings have been of no avail. (5)

حِكْمَةٌۢ بَٰلِغَةٌ ۖ فَمَا تُغْنِ ٱلنُّذُرُ ٥

So turn you away from them. On the day the Summoner will summon them to something unknown, (6)

فَتَوَلَّ عَنْهُمْ ۘ يَوْمَ يَدْعُ ٱلدَّاعِ إِلَىٰ شَىْءٍ نُّكُرٍ ٦

with eyes downcast, they will come out of their graves like swarming locusts (7)

خُشَّعًا أَبْصَٰرُهُمْ يَخْرُجُونَ مِنَ ٱلْأَجْدَاثِ كَأَنَّهُمْ جَرَادٌ مُّنتَشِرٌ ٧

rushing towards the Summoner. The unbelievers will say: 'Hard indeed is this day.' (8)

مُّهْطِعِينَ إِلَى ٱلدَّاعِ ۖ يَقُولُ ٱلْكَٰفِرُونَ هَٰذَا يَوْمٌ عَسِرٌ ﴿٨﴾

Before them, Noah's people rejected the truth. They rejected Our servant, saying: 'He is mad!' and he was harshly rebuffed. (9)

كَذَّبَتْ قَبْلَهُمْ قَوْمُ نُوحٍ فَكَذَّبُوا۟ عَبْدَنَا وَقَالُوا۟ مَجْنُونٌ وَٱزْدُجِرَ ﴿٩﴾

Therefore, he called out to his Lord: 'I am overcome. Grant me help!' (10)

فَدَعَا رَبَّهُۥٓ أَنِّى مَغْلُوبٌ فَٱنتَصِرْ ﴿١٠﴾

So We opened the gates of heaven with water pouring down in torrents, (11)

فَفَتَحْنَآ أَبْوَٰبَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ بِمَآءٍ مُّنْهَمِرٍ ﴿١١﴾

and caused the earth to burst forth with springs. Thus the waters met for a preordained purpose. (12)

وَفَجَّرْنَا ٱلْأَرْضَ عُيُونًا فَٱلْتَقَى ٱلْمَآءُ عَلَىٰٓ أَمْرٍ قَدْ قُدِرَ ﴿١٢﴾

We carried him in a vessel made of planks and nails (13)

وَحَمَلْنَٰهُ عَلَىٰ ذَاتِ أَلْوَٰحٍ وَدُسُرٍ ﴿١٣﴾

which floated under Our eyes: a reward for him who had been rejected. (14)

تَجْرِى بِأَعْيُنِنَا جَزَآءً لِّمَن كَانَ كُفِرَ ﴿١٤﴾

We have left this as a sign: will anyone take heed? (15)

وَلَقَد تَّرَكْنَٰهَآ ءَايَةً فَهَلْ مِن مُّدَّكِرٍ ﴿١٥﴾

How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings. (16)

فَكَيْفَ كَانَ عَذَابِى وَنُذُرِ ﴿١٦﴾

وَلَقَدْ يَسَّرْنَا ٱلْقُرْءَانَ لِلذِّكْرِ فَهَلْ مِن مُّدَّكِرٍ ﴿١٧﴾

We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed? (17)

كَذَّبَتْ عَادٌ فَكَيْفَ كَانَ عَذَابِى وَنُذُرِ ﴿١٨﴾

The people of 'Ād also rejected the truth. How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings. (18)

إِنَّآ أَرْسَلْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ رِيحًا صَرْصَرًا فِى يَوْمِ نَحْسٍ مُّسْتَمِرٍّ ﴿١٩﴾

We sent against them a howling, cold wind on a day of unceasing misfortune: (19)

تَنزِعُ ٱلنَّاسَ كَأَنَّهُمْ أَعْجَازُ نَخْلٍ مُّنقَعِرٍ ﴿٢٠﴾

it swept people away as though they were uprooted palm trunks. (20)

فَكَيْفَ كَانَ عَذَابِى وَنُذُرِ ﴿٢١﴾

How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings. (21)

وَلَقَدْ يَسَّرْنَا ٱلْقُرْءَانَ لِلذِّكْرِ فَهَلْ مِن مُّدَّكِرٍ ﴿٢٢﴾

We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed? (22)

كَذَّبَتْ ثَمُودُ بِٱلنُّذُرِ ﴿٢٣﴾

The people of Thamūd also rejected [My] warnings. (23)

فَقَالُوٓا۟ أَبَشَرًا مِّنَّا وَٰحِدًا نَّتَّبِعُهُۥٓ إِنَّآ إِذًا لَّفِى ضَلَٰلٍ وَسُعُرٍ ﴿٢٤﴾

They said: 'Are we to follow one single mortal from among ourselves? In that case, we would surely be in error, lost in utter folly. (24)

Could a message have been sent to him alone out of all of us? No, he is indeed an insolent liar.' (25)

أَءُلْقِيَ الذِّكْرُ عَلَيْهِ مِنۢ بَيْنِنَا بَلْ هُوَ كَذَّابٌ أَشِرٌ ﴿٢٥﴾

Tomorrow they will know who is the insolent liar. (26)

سَيَعْلَمُونَ غَدًا مَّنِ الْكَذَّابُ الْأَشِرُ ﴿٢٦﴾

We shall send them a she-camel as a test. So watch them and be patient. (27)

إِنَّا مُرْسِلُوا النَّاقَةِ فِتْنَةً لَّهُمْ فَارْتَقِبْهُمْ وَاصْطَبِرْ ﴿٢٧﴾

Tell them that the water is to be equitably shared between them: each should drink in turn. (28)

وَنَبِّئْهُمْ أَنَّ الْمَاءَ قِسْمَةٌۢ بَيْنَهُمْ ۖ كُلُّ شِرْبٍ مُّحْتَضَرٌ ﴿٢٨﴾

They called their friend, who took something and slew her. (29)

فَنَادَوْا صَاحِبَهُمْ فَتَعَاطَىٰ فَعَقَرَ ﴿٢٩﴾

How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings. (30)

فَكَيْفَ كَانَ عَذَابِي وَنُذُرِ ﴿٣٠﴾

We sent against them a single blast, and they became like the dry twigs of the sheepfold builder. (31)

إِنَّا أَرْسَلْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ صَيْحَةً وَاحِدَةً فَكَانُوا كَهَشِيمِ الْمُحْتَظِرِ ﴿٣١﴾

We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed? (32)

وَلَقَدْ يَسَّرْنَا الْقُرْآنَ لِلذِّكْرِ فَهَلْ مِن مُّدَّكِرٍ ﴿٣٢﴾

Lot's people also rejected [My] warnings. (33)

كَذَّبَتْ قَوْمُ لُوطٍۭ بِالنُّذُرِ ﴿٣٣﴾

We sent a stone-bearing wind against them, and only Lot's family did We save at the break of dawn, (34)

إِنَّآ أَرْسَلْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ حَاصِبًا إِلَّآ ءَالَ لُوطٍ نَّجَّيْنَٰهُم بِسَحَرٍ ﴿٣٤﴾

as an act of grace from Us: thus do We reward the thankful. (35)

نِّعْمَةً مِّنْ عِندِنَا كَذَٰلِكَ نَجْزِى مَن شَكَرَ ﴿٣٥﴾

He warned them of Our punishment, but they were in doubt about his warnings. (36)

وَلَقَدْ أَنذَرَهُم بَطْشَتَنَا فَتَمَارَوْا۟ بِٱلنُّذُرِ ﴿٣٦﴾

They even asked him to hand his guests over to them, so We sealed their eyes. 'Taste, then, My punishment and [the fulfilment of] My warnings.' (37)

وَلَقَدْ رَٰوَدُوهُ عَن ضَيْفِهِۦ فَطَمَسْنَآ أَعْيُنَهُمْ فَذُوقُوا۟ عَذَابِى وَنُذُرِ ﴿٣٧﴾

At daybreak abiding suffering befell them. (38)

وَلَقَدْ صَبَّحَهُم بُكْرَةً عَذَابٌ مُّسْتَقِرٌّ ﴿٣٨﴾

'Taste, then, My punishment and [the fulfilment of] My warnings.' (39)

فَذُوقُوا۟ عَذَابِى وَنُذُرِ ﴿٣٩﴾

We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed? (40)

وَلَقَدْ يَسَّرْنَا ٱلْقُرْءَانَ لِلذِّكْرِ فَهَلْ مِن مُّدَّكِرٍ ﴿٤٠﴾

Pharaoh's people also received warnings. (41)

وَلَقَدْ جَآءَ ءَالَ فِرْعَوْنَ ٱلنُّذُرُ ﴿٤١﴾

They rejected all Our signs; so We took them to task as only the Almighty, who is able to carry out His will, can take to task. (42)

كَذَّبُوا بِآيَاتِنَا كُلِّهَا فَأَخَذْنَاهُمْ أَخْذَ عَزِيزٍ مُّقْتَدِرٍ ﴿٤٢﴾

Are your unbelievers better than those others? Or have you been given an immunity in the sacred books? (43)

أَكُفَّارُكُمْ خَيْرٌ مِّنْ أُولَٰئِكُمْ أَمْ لَكُم بَرَاءَةٌ فِي الزُّبُرِ ﴿٤٣﴾

Or do they say, 'We are a great host and we will be victorious'? (44)

أَمْ يَقُولُونَ نَحْنُ جَمِيعٌ مُّنتَصِرٌ ﴿٤٤﴾

Their hosts will be routed, and they will turn tail and flee. (45)

سَيُهْزَمُ الْجَمْعُ وَيُوَلُّونَ الدُّبُرَ ﴿٤٥﴾

But the Last Hour is their appointed time, and the Last Hour is most calamitous and most bitter. (46)

بَلِ السَّاعَةُ مَوْعِدُهُمْ وَالسَّاعَةُ أَدْهَىٰ وَأَمَرُّ ﴿٤٦﴾

The evildoers are indeed in error and in raging flames of fire. (47)

إِنَّ الْمُجْرِمِينَ فِي ضَلَالٍ وَسُعُرٍ ﴿٤٧﴾

On the day when they are dragged into the fire, their faces down, [they will be told], 'Taste now the touch of hell-fire.' (48)

يَوْمَ يُسْحَبُونَ فِي النَّارِ عَلَىٰ وُجُوهِهِمْ ذُوقُوا مَسَّ سَقَرَ ﴿٤٨﴾

We have created everything in due measure. (49)

إِنَّا كُلَّ شَيْءٍ خَلَقْنَاهُ بِقَدَرٍ ﴿٤٩﴾

Our command is but once, like the twinkling of an eye. (50)

وَمَا أَمْرُنَا إِلَّا وَاحِدَةٌ كَلَمْحٍ بِالْبَصَرِ ﴿٥٠﴾

We destroyed people like you in the past. Will anyone take heed? (51)	وَلَقَدْ أَهْلَكْنَآ أَشْيَاعَكُمْ فَهَلْ مِن مُّدَّكِرٍ ﴿٥١﴾
Everything they do is noted in their records. (52)	وَكُلُّ شَيْءٍ فَعَلُوهُ فِي ٱلزُّبُرِ ﴿٥٢﴾
Every single thing, small or great, is recorded. (53)	وَكُلُّ صَغِيرٍ وَكَبِيرٍ مُّسْتَطَرٌ ﴿٥٣﴾
The God-fearing will be in gardens and running waters, (54)	إِنَّ ٱلْمُتَّقِينَ فِي جَنَّٰتٍ وَنَهَرٍ ﴿٥٤﴾
in a seat of truth, in the presence of an all-powerful Sovereign. (55)	فِي مَقْعَدِ صِدْقٍ عِندَ مَلِيكٍ مُّقْتَدِرٍ ﴿٥٥﴾

The Splitting of the Moon

> *The Last Hour draws near, and the moon is split asunder. Yet when the unbelievers see a sign, they turn away and say, 'Yet another act of continuous sorcery.' They deny the truth and follow their own desires. Yet everything is ultimately settled. There has come to them tidings that should have restrained [their arrogance], far-reaching wisdom, but warnings have been of no avail. So turn you away from them. On the day the Summoner will summon them to something unknown, with eyes downcast, they will come out of their graves like swarming locusts rushing towards the Summoner. The unbelievers will say: 'Hard indeed is this day.'* (Verses 1–8)

This is a highly inspiring opening, speaking of a momentous event in the wide universe that heralds an immeasurably greater event: "*The Last Hour draws near, and the moon is split asunder.*" (Verse 1) What a piece

of news! They saw the first event with their own eyes, and they can only anticipate the greater one. The splitting of the moon, witnessed by the Arabs, is confirmed in numerous reports; all agree that this took place, though they differ in their general and detailed descriptions of how it occurred. Here, we will give a few of these reports:

Anas ibn Mālik reports: "The people of Makkah asked the Prophet to show them a miracle, and the moon was split in Makkah twice. He read: '*The Last Hour draws near, and the moon is split asunder.*' [Related by Mālik.] The same report by Anas is given in another version stating the people's request for a miracle, then saying: "He showed them the moon split in two halves, and they could see Mount Ḥirā' in between." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.]

Jubayr ibn Muṭ'im reports: "The moon was split during the Prophet's lifetime and it was seen in two halves, one over each mountain. People said: 'Muḥammad has cast a magic spell on us.' Then they said: 'If he could cast a spell on us, he cannot do that to all people.'" [Related by Aḥmad, and also by al-Ṭabarī and al-Bayhaqī with different chains of transmission.]

Ibn 'Abbās is quoted by various transmitters as having said: "The moon was once split during the Prophet's lifetime." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] Other versions add: "This took place before the Prophet's migration to Madīnah. They could see its two halves." Yet another version related by al-Ṭabaranī with a different chain of transmitters quotes Ibn 'Abbās as saying: "The moon was eclipsed during the Prophet's time. The unbelievers said, 'A spell is cast on the moon'. A Qur'ānic revelation was bestowed from on high stating: '*The Last Hour draws near, and the moon is split asunder*'.

'Abdullāh ibn 'Umar said: "The moon was split in two halves during the Prophet's time in Makkah, with one half seen at the near side of the mountain and the other at the far side. The Prophet said: 'My Lord! Be my witness.'" [Related by Muslim and al-Tirmidhī.]

'Abdullāh ibn Mas'ūd reports: "During the Prophet's time, the moon was split in two and people could see it. The Prophet said: 'Look at it and be witnesses.'" [Related by Aḥmad, al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] Al-Bukhārī adds another version of this report with a different chain of transmitters quoting Ibn Mas'ūd: "When the moon was split, the Quraysh said: 'This

is a magic spell cast by Ibn Abī Kabshah [a derogatory nickname they gave to the Prophet]. Wait until some travellers arrive, for Muḥammad cannot cast his spell on all people.' When travellers came they confirmed the splitting of the moon."

The Qur'ān clearly stated this event to the unbelievers at the time, but there is no report to suggest that they ever denied it. It must, then, have happened in a way that makes denial practically impossible. Had there been a way to deny it, they would have done so, if only for the sake of meaningless argument. All that has been reported of their reactions are their statements that the Prophet had cast a magic spell on them. Yet they too directly witnessed the event and so knew for themselves that this was no magic. Had the Prophet been able to cast a spell on them, he could not have done the same to the travellers in the desert. Such travellers, let us recall, confirmed that they had witnessed this extraordinary event.

A Miracle in Support?

We need to add here a word about the report that the unbelievers asked the Prophet for a miracle and in response the moon was split in two showing them what they had asked for. This report is in conflict with a clear Qur'ānic statement that stipulates that the Prophet was not supported by any miracle of the type given to earlier messengers. The reason is explained in the following verse: "*Nothing hinders Us from sending miraculous signs except that the people of former times treated them as false.*" (17: 59) This statement makes clear that, in His infinite wisdom, God decided not to show unbelievers miraculous signs in support of His message, because earlier communities had rejected them as false.

On every occasion the unbelievers asked the Prophet for a miracle, his reply was that this was outside his remit: he was no more than a human messenger. He always referred them to the Qur'ān, declaring that it was the only sign to confirm the veracity of his message. "*Say, 'If all mankind and the* jinn *were to gather together for the purpose of producing the like of this Qur'ān, they would not produce anything like it, even though they helped one another as best they could.' Indeed We have explained to mankind, in this Qur'ān, every kind of lesson. Yet most people refuse to accept*

anything other than unbelief. They say: 'We shall not believe in you till you cause a spring to gush forth for us from the earth, or you have a garden of date-palms and vines, and you cause rivers to flow through it, or you cause the sky to fall upon us in pieces, as you have threatened, or you bring God and the angels face to face before us, or you have a house of gold, or you ascend to heaven. Indeed we shall not believe in your ascent to heaven until you bring us a book for us to read.' Say, 'Limitless in His glory is my Lord. Surely I am only a man and a Messenger.'" (17: 88–93)

Therefore, the claim that this splitting of the moon was in response to the unbelievers' demand for a miracle is contrary to clear Qur'ānic texts. It is also contrary to the strategy adopted by this final divine message in addressing the human mind only by the Qur'ān and its miraculous nature. It is the Qur'ān that directs people's minds to reflect on the signs available in the universe and in their own constitutions, as well as in historical events. The actual miracles that were given to the Prophet and confirmed by many authentic reports were merely aspects of God's grace which He extended to His Messenger. They did not constitute proofs of His message.

We, therefore, confirm that the splitting of the moon was indeed a reality, as stated in the Qur'ān and in many authentic reports indicating its place, time and appearance. We do not, however, endorse the causes stated in some of these reports, but we will highlight the combination of the Qur'ānic confirmation of its happening with the reference to the Last Hour drawing near. This is intended to awaken the human mind so that it responds to the divine message.

The splitting of the moon, then, was a clear sign to which the Qur'ān draws people's attention, just like it draws attention to other signs available in the universe around us. It wonders at the unbeliever's attitude to all these signs, including the splitting of the moon.

Physical miracles may appear amazing to the human mind prior to its maturity; that is prior to its ability to contemplate the permanent signs already available in the universe and being influenced by what these signs clearly prove. All the physical miracles that messengers were given before mankind had attained maturity were not as great as others already available in the world around us. Yet these do not excite man's instinctive reactions like those unfamiliar miracles.

Even if we consider the splitting of the moon on this occasion to be a physical miracle, the fact remains that the moon itself is a greater miracle. Its size, position, shape, nature, ever-changing stages, cycle, bearing on life on earth and how it stays in space without support make the moon a great miracle that people can see with their eyes and contemplate with their minds. It testifies to man's heart and mind as a witness to God's creation. It cannot be denied except by one who is a stubborn unbeliever.

The Qur'ān puts the human mind face to face with the universe and what it contains of God's signs. This is far better than providing an unfamiliar sign lasting only for a brief period and seen by only one generation of people in one particular place. The entire universe then is a great sign; here everything small or large is a sign of God's immeasurable ability. The human mind is invited at every moment to look at these permanent signs and to listen to their testimony, which is always lucid and decisive. It is also invited to enjoy all the marvellous aspects of creation, which combine beauty with perfection and excite a feeling of amazement to strengthen conviction. The present *sūrah* opens with a reference to the fact that the Last Hour is drawing near and to the splitting of the moon. It thus delivers a shock to the human mind, which then anticipates the Last Hour that is soon to happen, made all the more apparent by virtue of the great event that has just taken place. It can now stretch imagination to the events that will accompany the Last Hour.

How close is the Last Hour? The Prophet is quoted as saying: "I have been given my message as close to the Last Hour as these two", pointing with his index and middle finger. [Related by Aḥmad, al-Bukhārī and Muslim.]

Reactions to Great Signs

Yet close as the dreaded Hour is, and despite the exciting and great event they have just witnessed and the numerous signs around them, the unbelievers continued to stubbornly reject the message, insisting on their erring ways. Not only did they ignore the warnings, they also did not properly reflect on the pointers to the great truth that should have

brought them to faith: "*Yet when the unbelievers see a sign, they turn away and say, 'Yet another act of continuous sorcery.' They deny the truth and follow their own desires. Yet everything is ultimately settled. There has come to them tidings that should have restrained [their arrogance], far-reaching wisdom, but warnings have been of no avail.*" (Verses 2–5)

They indeed turned away and when they saw the moon split in two, they said that it was a magical spell cast over their eyes. They said the same thing about the Qur'ān, which is itself a great sign. They alleged that it too was another act of sorcery. Since signs to the truth are given all the time, they argue that such sorcery is continuous and never ending. They turn away from every sign, unwilling to reflect on their nature or understand their message. Prompted by arbitrary feelings that lack all evidence, they deny these signs and what messages they deliver, refusing to reflect on the fundamental truth confirmed by everything around them in the universe.

"*Yet everything is ultimately settled.*" (Verse 3) Everything in the universe is in its proper place, well settled, and not subject to any upheaval. The whole universe is well fixed, unaffected by fleeting desires, changing whims or blind coincidences. Everything occurs at its appropriate time, in its right place. This is clearly seen in everything around them: universal cycles, the laws of life, the stages of growth of plants and animals, the apparent characteristics of all materials, and indeed in the physiology of people's own bodies and organs which they cannot control. With everything around them settled in perfect order, as they clearly see, they are the only ones who act on the promptings of transitory whims and desires.

"*There has come to them tidings that should have restrained [their arrogance].*" (Verse 4) They received the truth about the universal signs highlighted in the Qur'ān, news of what happened to earlier communities when they denied God's messages, news of the life to come vividly depicted in the Qur'ān. All these should have been enough to stop anyone who wants to indulge in excess. Such news and tidings carried enough wisdom to direct people's minds to God's elaborate and wise planning. Twisted minds, however, do not open to acknowledge great signs, benefit by news or heed warnings: "*far-reaching wisdom, but warnings have been of no avail.*" (Verse 5) It is only a mind that is ready

to receive faith that benefits by all this and enjoys the great blessings of faith.

Having given a full picture of their stubborn rejection, the *sūrah* directs the Prophet to turn away from them, leaving them to face their fate on the day to the approach of which they pay little heed, despite seeing a sign like the splitting of the moon heralding it: "*So turn you away from them. On the day the Summoner will summon them to something unknown, with eyes downcast, they will come out of their graves like swarming locusts rushing towards the Summoner. The unbelievers will say: 'Hard indeed is this day.'* (Verses 6–8) These verses paint a scene of that day which is fierce and grim, consistent with the ambience of the *sūrah*. They also warn of the closeness of the Last Hour, highlighted by the splitting of the moon in two. All of this fits perfectly with the rhythm maintained throughout the *sūrah*.

It is a scene full of quick movement, yet it is also prominent, with clear lines and features: multitudes of people are rising from their graves, like swarming locusts, yet their eyes are downcast, humble, fearful. They rush towards the one who calls them forward, but they do not know what they are called to, and they cannot be reassured. As this gathering continues to take place, and amidst all this humility, the unbelievers say in a tone of distress that reflects their dawning awareness of the hardship ahead of them: "*Hard indeed is this day.*" (Verse 8)

Such, then, is the day which draws near; still they continue to deny it. Therefore, the Prophet is to turn away from them when that day arrives. He is to leave them to face their miserable destiny.

Far Back in History

After this powerful opening, the *sūrah* begins to portray scenes of the punishment meted out to earlier communities of unbelievers, who traversed the same way as the Arabs who denied the Prophet Muḥammad's message:

> *Before them, Noah's people rejected the truth. They rejected Our servant, saying: 'He is mad!' and he was harshly rebuffed. Therefore, he called out to his Lord: 'I am overcome. Grant me help!' So We opened the*

> *gates of heaven with water pouring down in torrents, and caused the earth to burst forth with springs. Thus the waters met for a preordained purpose. We carried him in a vessel made of planks and nails which floated under Our eyes: a reward for him who had been rejected. We have left this as a sign: will anyone take heed? How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings. We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed?* (Verses 9–17)

"*Before them, Noah's people rejected the truth.*" (Verse 9) They rejected the divine message and the signs given to them. "*They rejected Our servant,*" Noah, and said, "*He is mad!*" just like the Quraysh unjustly said of Muḥammad (peace be upon him), threatening to stone him, but still ridiculing him and demanding that he desist. "*And he was harshly rebuffed.*" (Verse 9) They though should have been the ones who took heed and desisted.

Having suffered all this rejection, Noah referred to his Lord who had entrusted him with His message requiring him to deliver it to his people. He submitted his report on how things stood between him and his people and the results of his efforts. He wanted the decision to be made by God after he himself had exerted every effort: "*Therefore, he called out to his Lord: 'I am overcome. Grant me help!'*" (Verse 10) I have done my best and I am now powerless. I can do no more. You are the One to grant help and support to Your message. All power belongs to You and the decision is Yours.

Hardly is the word uttered and the matter handed over to the Almighty when God's mighty hand points to the great universe and its crushing wheel starts to roll: "*So We opened the gates of heaven with water pouring down in torrents, and caused the earth to burst forth with springs. Thus the waters met for a preordained purpose.*" (Verses 11–12) This is a huge and overwhelming universal action described in well-chosen words and phrases. It begins by attributing the action directly to God: "*We opened*", so that we see that it is the hand of the Almighty that opened "*the gates of heaven,*" in the plural, "*with water pouring down in torrents,*" one wave after another. By the same token and movement, We "*caused the earth to burst forth with springs*". We see through the words water bursting forth everywhere, as though the whole earth has become an

immense and gushing spring. Thus the water pouring from the skies and the water gushing from the earth "*met for a preordained purpose*". These waters met in implementation of what God had preordained, obeying His divine command and bringing it to fulfilment.

When it was a huge flood, covering the face of the land, washing off the dirt that had lingered for long until the messenger despaired of ever being able to remove it, the Mighty and Compassionate hand was extended to that messenger ensuring his safety and giving him the honour he deserved: "*We carried him in a vessel made of planks and nails which floated under Our eyes: a reward for him who had been rejected.* (Verses 13–14) It is clear in the phraseology of these verses that it is intended to impart an air of grandeur to the vessel, which is described as having planks and nails. It is only described, rather than named, to add to its importance. It floats under God's own eyes and care. This is all "*a reward for him who had been rejected*", and threatened. It is a reward that replaces people's rejection by divine care and ridicule by honour. It describes the great power at the disposal of one who is defeated after having done his best. This is what is available to those who exert their maximum efforts in advocating His cause, and also then put the matter to Him praying for His help. All powers in the universe are mobilized to support such people, and all, with God's permission and under His guidance.

This scene of truth's complete victory and the total eradication of advocates of unbelief is followed by an address to those who look at it as if it were happening before their very eyes: "*We have left this as a sign: will anyone take heed?*" (Verse 15) This great event, with its well-known circumstances and results, is left as a sign and a reminder for future generations. Will any take heed? Then another gesture is added to awaken people's hearts telling them that the warnings given to them are all correct and the punishment that might be inflicted is severe indeed: "*How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings.*" (Verse 16)

It all took place as the Qur'ān describes. The Qur'ān remains present, available to all, easy to understand, attractive by its sincerity and straightforwardness, consistent with nature, full of wonders and always retaining its power. Never is it weakened by familiarity. But rather

whenever it is contemplated, it gives more of its treasures. The more it is read, the better we are comforted by it: "*We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed?*" (Verse 17)

This last verse provides the comment that occurs after each scene. The *sūrah* uses it by way of a pause inviting hearts to reflect after they have been shown one of the calamities that befell earlier deniers of the truth.

The 'Ād and the Stormwind

> *The people of 'Ād also rejected the truth. How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings? We sent against them a howling, cold wind on a day of unceasing misfortune: it swept people away as though they were uprooted palm trunks. How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings? We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed?* (Verses 18–22)

This is the second scene of powerful punishment that befell a whole community of unbelievers. It begins by reporting that the 'Ād rejected the truth, but before any details are given, the *sūrah* adds the question intended to magnify the severity of the punishment meted out: "*How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings?*" (Verse 18) The answer is immediately given by the *sūrah*: "*We sent against them a howling, cold wind on a day of unceasing misfortune: it swept people away as though they were uprooted palm trunks.*" (Verses 19–20) The Arabic description of the wind, *ṣarṣar*, gives by its very sound a feeling of that wind which carries unceasing misfortune. Probably no misfortune could be worse than that which happened to the 'Ād. The wind lifted the people and smashed them, leaving them like uprooted palm trunks.

The scene is violent and fearful; the stormwind sent against the 'Ād was one of God's forces. It is a natural phenomenon God has placed in the universe. It operates according to the universal system He has chosen. He sends it against whomever He wishes. It continues to operate within natural laws, where there is no conflict between its normal operation in the planned order of things and its fulfilment of God's orders whatever they happen to be. It is He who set this natural law and issued the

command. "*How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings.*" (Verse 21) This statement is now repeated after the scene has been shown providing the answer. The episode concludes with the other comment repeated throughout the *sūrah* according to its own flow: "*We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed?*" (Verse 22)

Aggressors Against God's Sign

> *The people of Thamūd also rejected [My] warnings. They said: 'Are we to follow one single mortal from among ourselves? In that case, we would surely be in error, lost in utter folly. Could a message have been sent to him alone out of all of us? No, he is indeed an insolent liar.' Tomorrow they will know who is the insolent liar. We shall send them a she-camel as a test. So watch them and be patient. Tell them that the water is to be equitably shared between them: each should drink in turn. They called their friend, who took something and slew her. How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings. We sent against them a single blast, and they became like the dry twigs of the sheepfold builder. We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed?* (Verses 23–32)

The Thamūd was the tribe that succeeded the 'Ād as the major power in Arabia. The 'Ād lived in the south, while the Thamūd were based in the north of the Peninsula. Despite the fact that the 'Ād's fate was well documented in the whole of Arabia, the Thamūd took no heed and rejected God's warnings just like the 'Ād before them.

"*They said: Are we to follow one single mortal from among ourselves? In that case, we would surely be in error, lost in utter folly. Could a message have been sent to him alone out of all of us? No, he is indeed an insolent liar.*" (Verses 24–25) This reiterates the same old argument that troubled unbelievers one generation after another. Could this man have been chosen from among us all to receive a divine message? Again, their attitude smacks of a hollow arrogance that does not consider the message itself, but rather looks at the person advocating it: "*Are we to follow one single mortal from among ourselves?*" (Verse 24)

Yet, why should it seem strange that God, who knows best to whom to entrust His message, should choose one particular person and give him revelations embodying reminders and directives? Why should it trouble them that God makes a choice when it is He, the Creator of all, who knows the one whose abilities and qualities make him the right choice. After all, it is God who gives the message. Their argument is baseless, and can only be entertained by deviant minds that do not look at the message itself to realize how true it is. They only look at the man advocating it, feeling too proud to follow one of their own number. They do not want to grant him position and status. Hence they say: "*Are we to follow one single mortal from among ourselves? In that case, we would surely be in error, lost in utter folly.*" (Verse 24)

The most peculiar thing is that they describe themselves to be in error if they were to follow divine guidance, and to be lost in folly if they accept faith. Hence, they point their fingers at the messenger God has chosen to lead them along the way of truth, accusing him of lying and of being greedy: "*No, he is indeed an insolent liar.*" (Verse 25) The accusation of lying means that he did not receive a message from God, and the accusation of insolence means that he was after a position of honour for himself. The same accusations have been levelled at all advocates of divine faith. They are often accused of using the divine message as a cover to seek position and personal interest. Such false accusations are the product of twisted minds that cannot discern what motivates people.

As the *sūrah* reports the story in narrative form, it suddenly changes course and continues as though it is happening at this very instance. It now speaks about what is going to happen, stating it in the form of a threat: "*Tomorrow they will know who is the insolent liar.*" (Verse 26) This is one of the tools employed in Qur'ānic narratives to give an air of actuality, transforming them from a mere tale to events taking place before spectators who are full of anticipation about their development.

"*Tomorrow they will know who is the insolent liar.*" (Verse 26) They will see the truth for themselves. They will not be immune to the consequences of this truth which heralds destruction for insolent liars: "*We shall send them a she-camel as a test. So watch them and be patient.*

Tell them that the water is to be equitably shared between them: each should drink in turn." (Verses 27–28) We stand watching with expectation to see what will happen when God sends them the she-camel as a test to prove their reality. Their messenger is also looking with expectation, carrying out the divine order that he should wait patiently until the test is completed. He has to deliver the instructions: the water the tribe has is to be shared equally, assigning one share to all the cattle and one to this she-camel alone. This must have been a she-camel with very special qualities, making her a miraculous sign. She takes the water one day, but does not disturb the other cattle on their day. She alternates with them in fairness.

The *sūrah* then reverts to the narrative style, reporting what happened afterwards: "*They called their friend, who took something and slew her.*" (Verse 29) This friend belonged to a group of evildoers in their city. The group itself is described in the Qur'ān thus: "*There were in the city nine men who did evil deeds in the land, and would not do any good.*" (27: 48) This one in particular is given an even apter description: "*their most hapless wretch.*" (91: 12) It is reported that this man got himself so drunk that he did not hesitate to undertake the miserable deed of killing the she-camel God had sent them as a sign. Their messenger had warned them against harming her, as this would render them liable to God's punishment. "*They called their friend, who took something and slew her.*" (Verse 29) Thus the test ended and the punishment was incurred: "*How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings?*" (Verse 30) It is a question meant to emphasize the seriousness of what happened before mentioning the punishment inflicted when the warnings were not heeded.

"*We sent against them a single blast, and they became like the dry twigs of the sheepfold builder.*" (Verse 31) The Qur'ān does not give us any details here about this blast. However, it is described in *Sūrah* 41 as a thunderbolt: "*If they turn away, say: I warn you of a thunderbolt like the thunderbolt that struck the 'Ād and Thamūd.*" (41: 13) The thunderbolt may only be a description of the blast making it a 'thunderbolt blast', or it may be a true description of its nature making the blast and the thunderbolt one and the same thing. Alternatively, the blast may be the sound produced by the thunderbolt, or the thunderbolt may merely

be an effect of the blast about which we know very little. Be that as it may, one blast was sent against those people, causing great havoc and leaving them like the *dry twigs* of one who needs such material to build a sheepfold, or used by a farmer as food for his cattle kept in a sheepfold. That blast reduced the people of Thamūd to a state of *dry twigs*. It is a fearful image raised against their earlier arrogance. All that remains of them is utter humiliation.

Now the *sūrah* draws its addressees' attention to the Qur'ān so that they may reflect. The Qur'ān provides an easy reminder: "*We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed?*" (Verse 32) The curtains are drawn, leaving a glimpse of dry twigs that irritate one's eyes and shudder one's mind, while the Qur'ān steadfastly calls upon people to reflect and take heed.

Lot's People

When the curtains are raised again, we have another episode taking place close to Arabia:

> *Lot's people also rejected [My] warnings. We sent a stone-bearing wind against them, and only Lot's family did We save at the break of dawn, as an act of grace from Us: thus do We reward the thankful. He warned them of Our punishment, but they were in doubt about his warnings. They even asked him to hand his guests over to them, so We sealed their eyes. 'Taste, then, My punishment and [the fulfilment of] My warnings.' At daybreak abiding suffering befell them. 'Taste, then, My punishment and [the fulfilment of] My warnings.' We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed?* (Verses 33–40)

The story of Lot's people is given in detail elsewhere in the Qur'ān. Its mention here is not intended to provide details, but rather to draw a lesson from what happens when people deny the truth and to remind them of the severe punishment that they may suffer. Hence, it starts with reporting their rejection of God's warning, followed by mentioning the punishment they suffered in consequence: "*Lot's people also rejected*

[My] warnings. We sent a stone-bearing wind against them, and only Lot's family did We save at the break of dawn, as an act of grace from Us: thus do We reward the thankful." (Verses 33–35) Elsewhere in the Qur'ān their punishment is described in the form of "*stones of clay,*" (51: 33) Here, the description adds that it was a wind that bears the sound of hurling stones. This description fits well with the fierce atmosphere that characterizes the whole *sūrah*. Only Lot's family, except his wife, were saved in an act of God's grace and as a reward for their faith in and gratitude to Him: "*Thus do We reward the thankful.*" They are to be blessed even in the midst of a great calamity.

The story is thus told from both ends: the unbelievers' initial rejection of the truth and their ultimate punishment. Then the *sūrah* provides us with some further details. Again, this is one of the methods the Qur'ān uses in its narratives to emphasize certain ideas.

The details given here are: "*He warned them of Our punishment, but they were in doubt about his warnings. They even asked him to hand his guests over to them, so We sealed their eyes. 'Taste, then, My punishment and [the fulfilment of] My warnings.' At daybreak abiding suffering befell them.*" (Verses 36–38) Lot took much pain in warning his people against the perverted indecency they used to practise, but they doubted all his warnings, circulating their doubts among themselves. They argued with him, disputing what he said. Their reckless audacity went beyond limits, to the extent that they even tried to persuade him to hand over his angel guests. They thought them to be handsome young men, and their dirty and perverted lust was uncontrollable. They shamelessly wanted to assault his guests. They cared little for the sanctity of their prophet's home, despite his repeated warnings against their perverted practices.

At this point, God's mighty hand took action. The angels began to do what they were assigned to do: "*So We sealed their eyes.*" The unbelievers could no longer see anything or anyone. They could not persuade Lot or catch his guests. The reference to sealing their eyes occurs so clearly only in this instance. In another *sūrah* the angels say to Lot: "*We are messengers from your Lord. They shall not touch you.*" (11: 81) Here, what made the unbelievers unable to do what they wanted is specified as sealing their eyes.

As the *sūrah* tells its narrative, it suddenly shows the event as if it is happening now. The address is made to those who deserve punishment: "*Taste, then, My punishment and the fulfilment of [My] warnings.*" You have been warned against incurring this punishment, but you disputed those very warnings.

The sealing of their eyes took place in the evening, but it was in the morning that God determined to inflict punishment on them all: "*At daybreak abiding suffering befell them.*" (Verse 38) This refers to the punishment already mentioned, which was the stone-bearing wind that purged the earth of their perversions.

Once more the mode of address changes so that we see the event as if it is taking place now. The punished are addressed as they suffer: "*Taste, then, My punishment and [the fulfilment of] My warnings.*" (Verse 39) This is followed by the familiar comment mentioned after the scene of turmoil: "*We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed?*" (Verse 40)

These historical accounts are concluded with a brief reference to the fate of a famous community of unbelievers, outside Arabia: "*Pharaoh's people also received warnings. They rejected all Our signs; so We took them to task as only the Almighty, who is able to carry out His will, can take to task.*" (Verses 41–42) Thus the whole story of Pharaoh and his entourage is summed up by mentioning its beginning and end: their receiving warnings, their rejection of all the signs and miracles that the messenger sent to them showed them, and their subsequent punishment by the Almighty. The reference here to God's might and ability to carry out His will indicate that their end was violent and calamitous. It implies an allusion to the hollowness of Pharaoh's power and his ability to inflict injustice. All his might is shown to be worthless. He could avail himself of nothing. God inflicted such a punishment on him and his host that can only be carried out by the Almighty. This is most fitting because of the injustice and tyranny they practised for so long.

A New and Powerful Warning

Now that the curtains have fallen after all these scenes of punishment and suffering, the *sūrah* addresses those who rejected the final message.

They have been reminded of the fates of those earlier peoples, and those images are still present in their minds. Now, they are given their own warning so that they avoid a similar fate. Indeed, they are warned against an even more terrible fate:

> *Are your unbelievers better than those others? Or have you been given an immunity in the sacred books? Or do they say, 'We are a great host and we will be victorious'? Their hosts will be routed, and they will turn tail and flee. But the Last Hour is their appointed time, and the Last Hour is most calamitous and most bitter. The evildoers are indeed in error, and in raging flames of fire. On the day when they are dragged into the fire, their faces down, [they will be told], 'Taste now the touch of hell-fire.' We have created everything in due measure. Our command is but once, like the twinkling of an eye. We destroyed people like you in the past. Will anyone take heed? Everything they do is noted in their records. Every single thing, small or great, is recorded.* (Verses 43–53)

It is a warning of punishment in this life and further suffering in the life to come. It removes any doubt about the veracity of this warning, sealing any loophole of hope to escape it, and any possibility of false accounting to evade it.

All those communities met their respective fates: what prevents a similar fate happening to you? "*Are your unbelievers better than those others?*" (Verse 43) What distinguishes you from earlier unbelievers? "*Or have you been given an immunity in the sacred books?*" (Verse 43) Such immunity recorded in sacred books might have had some effect. However, neither situation applies: you are no better than them and you have no immunity. Therefore, the only fate awaiting you is one similar to theirs, in the form God determines.

The *sūrah* then makes a general address, wondering at their attitude, particularly when they inspect their forces and feel themselves very powerful. They claim that they cannot be defeated: "*Or do they say, 'We are a great host and we will be victorious'?*" (Verse 44) At this point, a clear and decisive statement is loudly echoed: "*Their hosts will be routed, and they will turn tail and flee.*" (Verse 45) Neither large forces

nor powerful hosts will be of any avail. The One who announces this to them is none other than God Almighty. It came true at the time and it will always be true.

Al-Bukhārī reports on the authority of Ibn 'Abbās that on the day of the Battle of Badr, the Prophet was standing under a canopy and praying: "Lord! I appeal to You to fulfil Your promise. Lord! If You so wish, You may not be worshipped on earth again." Abū Bakr held his hand and said: "Messenger of God! This is enough. You have appealed hard to your Lord." He came out rushing, and saying: "*Their hosts will be routed, and they will turn tail and flee.*" In another report attributed to 'Ikrimah: "When this verse was revealed, 'Umar said: 'What host will be defeated and routed?' He later said: 'When on the day of the Battle of Badr I saw God's Messenger coming out and reading, "*Their hosts will be routed, and they will turn tail and flee,*" I knew its fulfilment."

Such was the defeat in this present life, but it is neither the final nor the most crushing and bitter one. Therefore, the *sūrah* leaves it aside to speak about the one that is to follow: "*But the Last Hour is their appointed time, and the Last Hour is most calamitous and most bitter.*" (Verse 46) It is far more bitter and terrible than any suffering they could ever experience in this life on earth. It is more calamitous than any scene of punishment drawn for their understanding: worse than the floods, the howling, cold wind, the blast, the stone-bearing wind and Pharaoh and his host's drowning.

Details are given to indicate how it is more calamitous and bitter. In this way, a powerful image of the Day of Judgement is drawn: "*The evildoers are indeed in error, and in raging flames of fire. On the day when they are dragged into the fire, their faces down, [they will be told], 'Taste now the touch of hell-fire.'*" (Verses 47–48) They are in an error that torments minds and souls, and in a raging fire that burns skin and bodies. This is because they and their like used to say in this world: "*Are we to follow one single mortal from among ourselves? In that case, we would surely be in error, lost in utter folly.*" (Verse 24) They will come to realize where error lies and what folly leads to. They will be dragged on their faces into the raging fire. Such humiliation contrasts with the pride they used to take in their might. Their suffering is increased even further by mental

pain, and all this is painted as though it were taking place now: "*Taste now the touch of hell-fire.*" (Verse 48)

Most Accurate Measure

The *sūrah* now makes a clear statement addressed to all mankind, but specifically to those Arabs, to drive home to them the fact that everything is subject to God's will, wisdom and planning. The punishment administered in this life and the one inflicted in the life to come, the messages and warnings given before them, the revelations given to God's messengers, and everything surrounding all this in terms of creation, events and planning are all subject to God's plan and will. All these and everything large or small are created in accordance with an accurate measure and are wisely planned. Nothing occurs haphazardly or by coincidence: "*We have created everything in due measure.*" (Verse 49) This applies to all creatures, silent or endowed with speech, moving or motionless, past and present, known or unknown: their creation is subject to an accurate measure. It is this measure that determines the nature, qualities, quantities, time and place of everything, as well as their links with others around them and the effect they produce.

This short Qur'ānic statement refers to a major and momentous truth that is confirmed by the universe. It is acknowledged by the mind as it looks at the world around it and responds to it. The human mind is bound to feel that the universe is finely coordinated. Everything in it is according to a measure that achieves absolute balance and coordination.

Observation, research and experience will understand this truth in as far as these methods can achieve and the human mind can fathom. Yet there remains beyond it what is greater and more perfect. Human nature appreciates the harmonious influence the universe leaves on it, since it is indeed part of this same coordinated and harmonious universe, in which everything is created in due measure.

Modern science has managed to reach some aspects of this truth, using what is available of tools and practises. It knows now the relative distances between planets and stars, their sizes and gravity to the extent that scientists are able to determine the positions of some planets before

they can actually see them. They make their assumptions on the basis that overall coordination requires that such planets be in the positions they have defined. Only the existence of such planets in their positions explains certain aspects of the movement of the planets they have monitored. Later on, their assumptions are proved true, which means that all celestial bodies are placed in space according to accurate relations that admit no error.

Scientists now realize that balance and coordination in the position of our planet earth are absolutely necessary to ensure the continuity of the type of life God has willed to place on it. They say that should this balance be disturbed in any aspect, all life on earth will be destroyed or would not have been possible in the first place. The size of the earth, its mass, distance from the sun, the mass of the sun, its temperature, the angle of its axis, its speed as it rotates and moves in orbit, the position of the moon in relation to the earth, its size and mass, the relation between sea and dry land on earth, and scores of other aspects and relations are all made according to an accurate measure. Should any of these be disturbed, everything would change resulting in the end of life on earth.

Our understanding of the balance and coordination between a large number of factors that are necessary to keep life on earth under control and establish the proper interrelations between living creatures and the conditions in which they live, and between different species of creatures, is such that we can now appreciate the profound truth the Qur'ānic verse refers to. The factors of life and survival on the one hand and those of death and extinction on the other in the environment and the nature of living creatures are always kept in such a fine balance as to ensure the continuity of life and its progress without allowing it to increase to the extent that there would not come a time when there is not enough of what is necessary for sustenance and survival.

We spoke at length on the harmony and balance in the universe and on earth in an earlier volume,[1] and it is fitting that we discuss here the balance in the interrelation between different species:

1. Volume XII, pp. 370–382.

Birds of prey are small in numbers because they lay few eggs. They also live in a special environment. On the other hand, they live longer than other birds. Had they been able to procreate at a higher rate and to live as long as they do in all environments, they would have ensured the extinction of smaller and more numerous birds or greatly reduced their numbers. These smaller birds are needed in such large numbers because they are part of the food chain and they fulfil an important role in the continuity of life on earth.

A fly lays millions of eggs, but its life span is two weeks. Had flies lived for a few years laying eggs at the same rate, the face of the earth would have been entirely covered with flies. Human life, as well as the life of many other species, would have become impossible. However, the balance established by the Almighty determines the relation between life span and the rate of procreation to ensure the continuity of life.

Among all living things, microbes are the largest in number and fastest in multiplication and devastation; but at the same time they have the weakest resistance and the shortest life span. They die in their millions as a result of many factors, such as cold, heat, light, acids, plasma, etc. They overpower only a limited number of animals and humans. Had they had stronger resistance or a longer life span, they would have destroyed life altogether.

Every living species is equipped with a weapon to protect itself against its natural enemies and to ensure its own survival. Such weapons vary from moving in numbers to ferocity of attack. In between there is a great variety of weapons and methods of self defence. Small snakes have their poison and move at speed to evade their enemies, while large ones rely on the strength of their muscles. Hence, the poisonous ones are fewer among large snakes. Beetles, which have little in the way of self defence, can discharge on whatever touches them a foul-smelling caustic substance to protect themselves. Deers can jump and run at a fast speed, while lions are extremely powerful. Such are all living creatures, large and small.

Likewise, man, animals, birds and all other creatures, including the lowest species, are equipped with the means to obtain their

> food and to benefit by what they feed upon. The fertilized egg which clings to the uterus needs nourishment. It causes a tear in the wall of the uterus, making a pool of blood which it can feed upon, and thus it grows. An embryo feeds through the umbilical cord that links it to its mother. Had the cord been too long, the food would have become fermented before it reached the embryo, and had it been too short, the food would have gushed through it, and harmed the embryo.[2]
>
> When birth takes place a white, slightly yellowish liquid is produced from the mother's breasts. One of the wonders of God's creation is that this liquid consists of dissolved chemicals to protect the newborn from illness. One day after the child's birth milk begins to flow. God's elaborate planning ensures that the quantity of the mother's milk is increased day after day, amounting to one and a half litres a day by the time the child is one year old, while it weighs only a few ounces in the early days. It is not merely the quantity of the milk that increases to satisfy the child's needs, but also its ingredients change in kind and concentration. In the early days it is more like water containing a small amount of carbohydrates, but as time goes on the concentration of sugar, carbohydrates and proteins increases day after day, to ensure the child's healthy growth.[3]

When we study the different systems in man's body, their functions, physiology and role in ensuring man's health and survival, we are amazed at the elaborate planning. We see God's hand taking care of every individual, and indeed every organ and cell. We cannot discuss here this world of wonders. Therefore, we will only refer to the fine tuning of endocrine glands:

> These are small chemical factories providing the body with the chemicals it needs. They are so powerful that a fraction of one billionth of them will seriously affect the body. They function in such an order that the secretion of each gland complements the secretion of another. All that we know about these secretions is that

2. Nawfal, 'Abd al-Razzāq, *Allah wal-'ilm al-Ḥadīth*, Cairo (n.d.), pp. 46–47.
3. Ibid., pp. 47–48.

they are surprisingly complex. Should their secretion be disturbed, this will cause general harm in the body, which could be very serious if it continues even for a short while.[4]

Animals have different systems according to their different natures, as well as the environments and circumstances in which they live.

Lions, tigers, wolves, hyenas, and other predators that need to hunt and kill their prey, have sharp teeth and firm molars. They also have strong leg muscles, as well as sharp claws. Their stomachs secrete the necessary acids and enzymes to digest raw meat and bones.[5]

Ruminant animals that graze in meadows have been equipped with different tools:

Their digestive systems have been designed in a way that suits their environments. Their mouths are relatively wide, without canine teeth or molars. Instead they have sharp front teeth that help them to eat grass and plants quickly, swallowing them in gulps so as to be able to provide their natural service for man. Divine care has given these animals a most peculiar digestive system. The food they eat goes first to the rumen, which serves as a storage place. When the animal has finished its day's work and sits for rest, the food it has eaten goes to another part called the reticulum, and then it is sent back to the mouth where it will now be chewed well before it is sent to a third compartment of the stomach called the omasum. The final stage is a fourth compartment called the abomasum. This very long process also serves to protect these animals which are often attacked in their grazing places by predators. Therefore, they often need to swallow their food fast and hide. Scientists say that this process of digestion is necessary, indeed vital. Grass is hard to digest because of the cellulose it contains, which means that the animal needs a long time for digesting its food. Had it not had a rumen to store the food, these animals would have had to spend

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4. Ibid., pp. 51–52.
5. Ibid., pp. 71–72.

a long time, may be a whole day, in grazing without even giving them enough nourishment. The very process of cutting the grass and eating it would have been tiring to the animal. As it is, taking the food in gulps and storing it in the rumen where it is softened and fermented somewhat, then bringing it back to the mouth for further chewing, enables these animals to fulfil all functions: doing their work, eating and proper digestion. All glory belongs to God who created everything in an elaborate design.[6]

Birds of prey such as the owl and the kite are given sharp, curved, hook-like beaks to be able to tear flesh. Geese and ducks are, by contrast, given wide, flat and spoon-like beaks suitable for catching food in mud and water. They even have on both sides of their beaks little lumps which serve as teeth to cut grass. Domestic fowls and pigeons which pick up seeds from the ground have short and pointed beaks. The swan has a conspicuously long beak at the bottom of which there is a sack that serves like a fisherman's net because swans feed mainly on fish. The hoopoe has a long and pointed beak that serves to look for insects and worms that are often below the surface of the ground. Scientists often say that a glance at a bird's beak is enough to tell us what it feeds on. The rest of the digestive system of birds is wonderfully peculiar. Since birds do not have teeth, they are given a crop and a gizzard for digestion. Birds also pick some hard objects and stones to help the gizzard in its digestive function.[7]

If we were to look at all the different species in the same way, it would take far too long in this exercise and would deviate from the method we have followed in this work. Therefore, we will now just look at the amoeba, the single-celled creature, to see how God has set its role in life and how He takes care of it.

The amoeba is a microscopic organism that lives in ponds or stagnant water, or on stones settled at the bottom of such waters. Its body is jellylike, changing shape as needed. When it moves, it

6. Ibid., pp. 72–73.
7. Ibid., pp. 73–74.

pushes forwards parts of its body to use like feet. When it finds food, it picks it up with similar protrusions. It secretes a digestive fluid so as to digest what is useful to it and ejects the remainder. It breathes with all its body, taking oxygen from water. Imagine this little creature which can never be seen with the naked eye performing all life functions, including taking nourishment, breathing, discharging unwanted stuff and moving around. When it has completed its growth, it divides into two, with each forming a separate amoeba...

The wonders of the plant world are no less amazing than those of human, animal and bird life. Elaborate planning is equally observed in plants: "*It is He who has created all things and ordained them in due proportions.*"[8] (25: 2)

A Far Greater Perspective

Yet the question of elaborate planning is far greater than this. Indeed everything that takes place in the universe: all events in all directions, large and small, take place according to a plan and in a set measure. This applies to every occurrence in history, every feeling experienced by every individual, every breath, etc. Each breath takes place in due measure with regard to time, place and other factors and circumstances. It is related to the universal system and taken into account in the overall universal balance, just like major events. A wild, little plant that sends out its shoot in the open desert is placed there according to an accurate measure. It fulfils a function that is related to the existence of the universe. The same applies to a single ant moving to its destination, a particle in the air, an organism floating on water, just as it applies to the huge celestial bodies in this vast universe. All are there in due measure with regard to time, place, quantity, shape and form, maintaining due balance in all situations.

Who can say, for example, that the Prophet Jacob's marriage to a second wife who gave him his two sons, Joseph and Benjamin, was not

8. Ibid., pp. 101–102.

a personal affair, but rather an intended event serving an overall plan? It was planned that Joseph's half brothers should feel very jealous of him, take him and throw him in the well, after they had thought of killing him, so that a travelling caravan would pick him up and sell him in Egypt where he would find a home in the palace of the Chief Minister. There, he would then be subjected to the Minister's wife's advances, but he resisted all temptation and as a result was thrown into prison. Why? There he would meet two of Pharaoh's servants and interpret their dreams. Why? Until that moment, there is absolutely no answer. People wonder why Joseph should go through all this suffering? Why should his father, who is a prophet, suffer until he loses his eyesight? The first answer comes after a quarter of a century of suffering. Divine will has been preparing him to supervise the affairs of Egypt, its people and the populations of the surrounding areas during seven years of drought. And then what? He brings his parents and brothers to Egypt where their offspring constitute the Children of Israel who were later persecuted by Pharaoh. Then Moses is born and his life is also carefully planned. Beyond that, various issues, events and trends arise, having a bearing on human life throughout the world until today.

Who can say, for example, that the Prophet Abraham's marriage to Hagar, the Egyptian woman, was not a personal affair, but rather, along with the events preceding it in Abraham's life, part of a careful plan. It involved all the events leading to his forsaking his home town in Iraq, going to Egypt where he married Hagar and she gave him his first son, Ishmael. Then he took Ishmael and his mother, leaving them in the neighbourhood of the yet to be built Sacred Mosque in Makkah. Muḥammad, (peace be upon him), would then be born out of Abraham's seed in Arabia, the most suitable place on earth for the Islamic message. This series of events then culminated in the most important one in the history of mankind.

God's will remains behind the far end of every thread, every event: birth, point, step, change and ultimate result. All occur in accordance with His will which is profound, all comprehensive and inevitable. People sometimes see only the near end of the thread, but not its far end. There could be an extended, long span of time between the beginning and end in their own lives, which makes them unable to see the wisdom

behind what takes place. They will then try to hasten things, and may also offer suggestions. They may even go beyond this, demonstrating anger and impudence. God teaches them in the Qur'ān that everything occurs in due measure and appropriate proportion. Therefore, they should leave things to the One who controls all. This will give them comfort and reassurance, and they will then be sure of the balance and coordination brought about by God's will.

Operating the Divine Will

Along with the elaborate planning and the assigning of due measures goes God's power, which accomplishes the greatest of events by the simplest means: "*Our command is but once, like the twinkling of an eye.*" (Verse 50) It takes just a signal or one word and everything, great or tiny, is done. In fact there is nothing to distinguish great from tiny; it is all part of how human beings see things. Nor is there a question of time, not even the twinkling of an eye; it is merely a metaphor to help people understand. Time is no more than a human conception that arises from the position of the earth and its rotation. As far as God and His plans are concerned, it has no significance.

The command is given just once and this entire universe comes into existence. Similarly, any change in it can be accomplished. Just one command and it will all go away as God wishes. In everything, the command is given once only: bringing anyone into life, taking it here or there, causing it to die, bringing it back in some shape or form, resurrecting all creatures from all generations to gather them for the reckoning and reward. It is a once only command that requires no effort or time, because it comes from the Almighty in due measure and with perfect ease.

It was always a once-only command to bring about the terrible fate of communities that rejected the truth of God's message. The *sūrah* reminds its addressees of the fates suffered by communities who, like them, rejected the truth: "*We destroyed people like you in the past. Will anyone take heed? Everything they do is noted in their records. Every single thing, small or great, is recorded.*" (Verses 51–53) Those fates are mentioned in the *sūrah*, but people need to take heed and think of the likely outcome

of the position they take towards God's message. Yet the story is not over for those communities that suffered such calamities; they have to face further reckoning that takes account of every little thing: "*Everything they do is noted in their records,*" which will be submitted on the Day of Reckoning. "*Every single thing, small or great, is recorded,*" so that nothing is forgotten.

Now the *sūrah* shows a different image of trust and safety. It is the destiny enjoyed by the righteous: "*The God-fearing will be in gardens and running waters, in a seat of truth, in the presence of an all-powerful Sovereign.*" (Verses 54–55) They enjoy all this while the evildoers are in error, in raging flames where they are dragged with their faces down and rebuked.

This image describes the bliss which the God-fearing enjoy in its two components, the physical and the spiritual. The physical aspect, granted for the senses, is summed up in an all-embracing phrase, '*in gardens and running waters*'. The very sound of these words adds connotations of ease, comfort and enjoyment. The spiritual component touches the heart and mind; it is the bliss of being close to God: "*in a seat of truth, in the presence of an all-powerful Sovereign.*" It is a steady, firm seat, giving pleasure and reassurance because it is close to where all eyes are focused. This is all because these righteous people fear God and are apprehensive of what may become of them. God will not allow double fear to overwhelm anyone: fearing Him in this present life and fear in the life to come. Whoever truly fears Him in this world will be safe and reassured in the next. As good believers enjoy security at the time and place of greatest fear, they are granted a pleasant environment and honour.

With this soft rhythm and pleasant outcome, the *sūrah* that portrayed a series of distressing and fearful images comes to an end. This gives its conclusion a more profound effect. It is a perfect way of educating by the One who knows how to influence hearts and souls. This is yet another aspect of operating the accurate measure by the One who has created everything in due measure. All glory to the One who knows all.

SŪRAH 55

Al-Raḥmān

(The Lord of Grace)

Prologue

The composition of this Makkan *sūrah* has a special and prominent pattern. Essentially, it provides a general announcement, made in the open space of the universe, highlighting the blessings God bestows from on high. These are easily discernible in the beauty of everything He has created, in the great favours He grants to all, in the way He controls all existence, and in the fact that all creatures look up to see His face, etc. It is an invitation to all the universe to be witnesses against the two worlds of *jinn* and humans. Both are addressed in this *sūrah* on an equal basis, in the presence of all creatures in this vast universe. Both are challenged to deny, if they can, any of God's blessings. The challenge is repeated after every single blessing mentioned, each with their detailed aspects. The great universe, then, is the stage where all these blessings are exhibited.

The distinctive ring of the announcement is apparent in the *sūrah*'s structure as also in the endings of its verses, with a final rising note in each, coupled with a long vowel pointing far. It is also apparent in the opening of the *sūrah*, which gives an air of expectation of what will follow. It begins with a single word, *al-Raḥmān*, as a subject without a predicate. This word, which is a name and an attribute of God that we

translate as *the Lord of Grace*, stresses mercy and adds emphasis to the announcement. Beyond that, the *sūrah* is a great exhibition of God's grace and blessings.

The first blessing put forward in this great exhibition is the teaching of the Qur'ān, the greatest favour God has bestowed on man. This is mentioned ahead of man's own creation as also his faculty of speech, his most important and distinctive quality. The *sūrah* then opens up pages of the universe that show God's blessings: the sun, the moon, the stars, the trees, the skies, the balance, the earth and what it contains of fruit, dates, grains and aromatic plants, the *jinn*, mankind, the two risings and the two settings, the two great bodies of water and the barrier between them, what is taken out from them and what goes through them. When these great pages have been shown in full, the *sūrah* then adds an image showing them all as perished, where no creature is left alive yet God's face remains full of majesty. To Him all creatures turn awaiting His decision regarding them.

Against the background of these two extremes of absolute extinction and absolute presence, a fearsome warning is issued to both man and *jinn*: "*We shall attend to you two huge communities [of* jinn *and mankind]. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?* Jinn *and mankind, if you can pass beyond the regions of heaven and earth, then do so. You cannot pass beyond them without [God's] authority. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? A flash of fire will be sent against you, and molten brass, and you will be left without support. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verses 31–36)

This is followed by a scene of the end, i.e. the Day of Judgement, against a backdrop of the universe in which we see the sky flowing with the colour of a red rose, and the suffering endured by evildoers. A long and detailed scene of the reward given to the God-fearing then follows. This great exhibition of God's blessings aptly concludes with a verse that says: "*Blessed is the name of your Lord, full of majesty, granting grace.*" (Verse 78)

Al-Raḥmān
(The Lord of Grace)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

[It is] the Lord of Grace (1)

ٱلرَّحْمَٰنُ ﴿١﴾

who has taught the Qur'ān. (2)

عَلَّمَ ٱلْقُرْءَانَ ﴿٢﴾

He created man (3)

خَلَقَ ٱلْإِنسَٰنَ ﴿٣﴾

and taught him to articulate thought and speech. (4)

عَلَّمَهُ ٱلْبَيَانَ ﴿٤﴾

The sun and the moon function in due measure. (5)

ٱلشَّمْسُ وَٱلْقَمَرُ بِحُسْبَانٍ ﴿٥﴾

The stars and the trees prostrate themselves [before Him]. (6)

وَٱلنَّجْمُ وَٱلشَّجَرُ يَسْجُدَانِ ﴿٦﴾

He has raised the skies high, and has set the balance, (7)

وَٱلسَّمَآءَ رَفَعَهَا وَوَضَعَ ٱلْمِيزَانَ ﴿٧﴾

so that you may not exceed the balance. (8)

أَلَّا تَطْغَوْا فِى ٱلْمِيزَانِ ﴿٨﴾

Weigh, therefore, with justice and do not fall short in the balance. (9)

وَأَقِيمُوا ٱلْوَزْنَ بِٱلْقِسْطِ وَلَا تُخْسِرُوا ٱلْمِيزَانَ ﴿٩﴾

He has laid the earth for His creatures, (10)

وَٱلْأَرْضَ وَضَعَهَا لِلْأَنَامِ ﴿١٠﴾

فِيهَا فَٰكِهَةٌ وَٱلنَّخْلُ ذَاتُ ٱلْأَكْمَامِ ﴿١١﴾

with all its fruits, its palm trees with sheathed clusters, (11)

وَٱلْحَبُّ ذُو ٱلْعَصْفِ وَٱلرَّيْحَانُ ﴿١٢﴾

its husked grain and its sweet-smelling plants. (12)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿١٣﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (13)

خَلَقَ ٱلْإِنسَٰنَ مِن صَلْصَٰلٍ كَٱلْفَخَّارِ ﴿١٤﴾

He created man from dried clay, like pottery, (14)

وَخَلَقَ ٱلْجَآنَّ مِن مَّارِجٍ مِّن نَّارٍ ﴿١٥﴾

and created the *jinn* from raging flames of fire. (15)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿١٦﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (16)

رَبُّ ٱلْمَشْرِقَيْنِ وَرَبُّ ٱلْمَغْرِبَيْنِ ﴿١٧﴾

He is the Lord of the two risings and the Lord of the two settings. (17)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿١٨﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (18)

مَرَجَ ٱلْبَحْرَيْنِ يَلْتَقِيَانِ ﴿١٩﴾

He has given freedom to the two great bodies of water, so that they may meet; (19)

بَيْنَهُمَا بَرْزَخٌ لَّا يَبْغِيَانِ ﴿٢٠﴾

yet between them is a barrier which they do not cross. (20)

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (21)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٢١﴾

Pearls and corals come from both. (22)

يَخْرُجُ مِنْهُمَا ٱللُّؤْلُؤُ وَٱلْمَرْجَانُ ﴿٢٢﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (23)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٢٣﴾

His are the lofty ships that sail like floating mountains through the seas. (24)

وَلَهُ ٱلْجَوَارِ ٱلْمُنشَـَٔاتُ فِى ٱلْبَحْرِ كَٱلْأَعْلَـٰمِ ﴿٢٤﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (25)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٢٥﴾

All that lives on it perishes; (26)

كُلُّ مَنْ عَلَيْهَا فَانٍ ﴿٢٦﴾

but forever will remain the face of your Lord, full of majesty, granting grace. (27)

وَيَبْقَىٰ وَجْهُ رَبِّكَ ذُو ٱلْجَلَـٰلِ وَٱلْإِكْرَامِ ﴿٢٧﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (28)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٢٨﴾

Everyone in heaven and earth entreats Him. Every day He manifests Himself in some wonderful way. (29)

يَسْـَٔلُهُۥ مَن فِى ٱلسَّمَـٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ كُلَّ يَوْمٍ هُوَ فِى شَأْنٍ ﴿٢٩﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (30)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٣٠﴾

We shall attend to you two huge communities [of *jinn* and mankind]. (31)

سَنَفْرُغُ لَكُمْ أَيُّهَ ٱلثَّقَلَانِ ﴿٣١﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (32)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٣٢﴾

Jinn and mankind, if you can pass beyond the regions of heaven and earth, then do so. You cannot pass beyond them without authority. (33)

يَٰمَعْشَرَ ٱلْجِنِّ وَٱلْإِنسِ إِنِ ٱسْتَطَعْتُمْ أَن تَنفُذُوا۟ مِنْ أَقْطَارِ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ فَٱنفُذُوا۟ ۚ لَا تَنفُذُونَ إِلَّا بِسُلْطَٰنٍ ﴿٣٣﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (34)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٣٤﴾

A flash of fire will be sent against you, and molten brass, and you will be left without support. (35)

يُرْسَلُ عَلَيْكُمَا شُوَاظٌ مِّن نَّارٍ وَنُحَاسٌ فَلَا تَنتَصِرَانِ ﴿٣٥﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (36)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٣٦﴾

When the sky is rent asunder and becomes rose-red like [burning] oil. (37)

فَإِذَا ٱنشَقَّتِ ٱلسَّمَآءُ فَكَانَتْ وَرْدَةً كَٱلدِّهَانِ ﴿٣٧﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (38)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٣٨﴾

On that day neither mankind nor *jinn* will be asked about their sins. (39)

فَيَوْمَئِذٍ لَّا يُسْـَٔلُ عَن ذَنۢبِهِۦٓ إِنسٌ وَلَا جَآنٌّ ﴿٣٩﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (40)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٤٠﴾

The guilty ones will be known by their mark and shall be seized by their forelocks and their feet. (41)

يُعْرَفُ ٱلْمُجْرِمُونَ بِسِيمَٰهُمْ فَيُؤْخَذُ بِٱلنَّوَٰصِى وَٱلْأَقْدَامِ ﴿٤١﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (42)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٤٢﴾

This is the hell which the guilty deny. (43)

هَٰذِهِۦ جَهَنَّمُ ٱلَّتِى يُكَذِّبُ بِهَا ٱلْمُجْرِمُونَ ﴿٤٣﴾

They will go round between its flames and scalding water. (44)

يَطُوفُونَ بَيْنَهَا وَبَيْنَ حَمِيمٍ ءَانٍ ﴿٤٤﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (45)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٤٥﴾

For those who stand in fear of their Lord's presence there shall be two gardens. (46)

وَلِمَنْ خَافَ مَقَامَ رَبِّهِۦ جَنَّتَانِ ﴿٤٦﴾

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٤٧﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (47)

ذَوَاتَآ أَفْنَانٍ ﴿٤٨﴾

With shading branches. (48)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٤٩﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (49)

فِيهِمَا عَيْنَانِ تَجْرِيَانِ ﴿٥٠﴾

With a pair of flowing springs. (50)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٥١﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (51)

فِيهِمَا مِن كُلِّ فَٰكِهَةٍ زَوْجَانِ ﴿٥٢﴾

With every kind of fruit in pairs. (52)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٥٣﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (53)

مُتَّكِـِٔينَ عَلَىٰ فُرُشٍۭ بَطَآئِنُهَا مِنْ إِسْتَبْرَقٍ ۚ
وَجَنَى ٱلْجَنَّتَيْنِ دَانٍ ﴿٥٤﴾

They will recline on carpets lined with rich brocade; and the fruit of both these gardens will be within easy reach. (54)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٥٥﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (55)

In both [gardens] will be mates of modest gaze, whom neither man nor *jinn* will have touched before. (56)

فِيهِنَّ قَٰصِرَٰتُ ٱلطَّرۡفِ لَمۡ يَطۡمِثۡهُنَّ إِنسٌ قَبۡلَهُمۡ وَلَا جَآنّٞ ٥٦

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (57)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ٥٧

[These mates look] like rubies and corals. (58)

كَأَنَّهُنَّ ٱلۡيَاقُوتُ وَٱلۡمَرۡجَانُ ٥٨

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (59)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ٥٩

Shall the reward of good be anything but good? (60)

هَلۡ جَزَآءُ ٱلۡإِحۡسَٰنِ إِلَّا ٱلۡإِحۡسَٰنُ ٦٠

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (61)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ٦١

Besides these two there are two other gardens. (62)

وَمِن دُونِهِمَا جَنَّتَانِ ٦٢

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (63)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ٦٣

Both of the deepest green. (64)

مُدۡهَآمَّتَانِ ٦٤

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (65)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ٦٥

فِيهِمَا عَيْنَانِ نَضَّاخَتَانِ ﴿٦٦﴾

With two gushing springs. (66)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٦٧﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (67)

فِيهِمَا فَٰكِهَةٌ وَنَخْلٌ وَرُمَّانٌ ﴿٦٨﴾

With fruits, date-palms and pomegranate trees. (68)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٦٩﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (69)

فِيهِنَّ خَيْرَٰتٌ حِسَانٌ ﴿٧٠﴾

There will be in [these gardens] all things most excellent and beautiful. (70)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٧١﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (71)

حُورٌ مَّقْصُورَٰتٌ فِى ٱلْخِيَامِ ﴿٧٢﴾

[They will have] dark-eyed and modest companions, sheltered in pavilions. (72)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٧٣﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (73)

لَمْ يَطْمِثْهُنَّ إِنسٌ قَبْلَهُمْ وَلَا جَآنٌّ ﴿٧٤﴾

Neither man nor *jinn* will have touched them before. (74)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٧٥﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (75)

They will recline on green cushions and fine carpets. (76)

مُتَّكِـِٔينَ عَلَىٰ رَفْرَفٍ خُضْرٍ وَعَبْقَرِيٍّ حِسَانٍ ﴿٧٦﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (77)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٧٧﴾

Blessed is the name of your Lord, full of majesty, granting grace. (78)

تَبَٰرَكَ ٱسْمُ رَبِّكَ ذِى ٱلْجَلَٰلِ وَٱلْإِكْرَامِ ﴿٧٨﴾

Man's Creation and Education

In total, the *sūrah* is a general announcement issued from on high and echoed throughout the universe. Furthermore, it is understood by all who dwell in the universe.

It begins with a verse consisting of one word, *al-Raḥmān*, which we translate as '*the Lord of Grace*'. This opening is intended in meaning, pronunciation and cadence. *Al-Raḥmān:* the word has a ring which is echoed everywhere far and loud. *Al-Raḥmān:* its rising intonation resonates throughout the universe, speaking to every creature. It fills the skies and the earth, and reaches every ear and every heart.

Al-Raḥmān. Just the one word, and the verse is finished. The whole universe hearkens, awaiting the great news that follows this great opening. It comes immediately:

> *[It is] the Lord of Grace who has taught the Qur'ān. He created man and taught him to articulate thought and speech. The sun and the moon function in due measure. The stars and the trees prostrate themselves [before Him]. He has raised the skies high, and has set the balance, so that you may not exceed the balance. Weigh, therefore, with justice and do not fall short in the balance. He has laid the earth for His creatures, with all its fruits, its palm trees with sheathed clusters, its husked grain and its sweet-smelling plants. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?* (Verses 1–13)

This is the first section detailing some of the blessings bestowed by the Lord of Grace. It gives the first news after the announcement He "*has taught the Qur'ān.*" This is indeed the highest possible favour that most splendidly reflects God's grace as it is bestowed on man. The Qur'ān is the complete and accurate translation of the laws of the universe and the code of living chosen by heaven for people on earth. It establishes a clear relation between such laws and code, building faith, concepts, values, standards, systems and affairs on the same solid foundation of the universe. It thus gives man comfort, reassurance, understanding and a mutual response with the universe.

The Qur'ān opens up man's senses and feelings to this beautiful universe, just as if it were being seen for the first time. It thus renews people's feelings about their own existence and the existence of the universe around them. It also goes even further than this, giving everything around them life such that it interrelates with humans. Thus wherever man travels or stays, throughout his journey on earth, he finds himself among caring and loving friends.

The Qur'ān instils in people's minds that they are placed in charge of the earth, honoured by God, given the great trust that the heavens, the earth and the mountains were reluctant to undertake. It thus enables them to feel their own value, derived from the fulfilment of their higher human quality that can only be acquired through faith. It is faith that awakens the breath of God's spirit in people's souls and brings alive the highest favour God bestows on man.

The Faculty of Speech

Therefore, the *sūrah* mentions teaching the Qur'ān ahead of man's creation: "*He created man and taught him to articulate thought and speech.*" (Verses 3–4) We will leave aside for now the point of man's creation, as the *sūrah* will presently mention this again. What is specifically intended here is man's teaching so that he is able to express what is in his mind.

We see man speaking and articulating his thoughts, explaining his ideas, and responding to others, but we do not give much thought to this great favour God has granted. It is indeed a great miracle to which

the Qur'ān often alerts us. What is man? How does he begin? And how does he learn to articulate himself?

It is one cell that begins its life journey in the uterus, infinitely small, hardly visible under the microscope, and cannot reveal anything by itself. Yet soon enough this single cell becomes an embryo made up of millions of cells of a great variety: some are bone, some cartilage, flesh, nerve, skin, etc. They make up the different organs with their fascinating functions, such as hearing, sight, taste, smell, touch, and even the most important and greatest of these priceless favours: mental perception, verbal articulation, sensing and inspiration. All this from that microscopic cell: how? With what power? It is all from the Lord of Grace, and by His making.

Let us consider how such articulation occurs, remembering the facts mentioned in the following Qur'ānic verse: "*God has brought you forth from your mothers' wombs devoid of all knowledge, but He has given you hearing, and sight, and minds, so that you may be grateful.*" (16: 78)

The system of speech is an infinitely amazing wonder: the lips, tongue, jaws, teeth, larynx, trachea, bronchi and lungs, all participate in the vocalization process and form a ring in the chain of speech articulation. Greatly amazing as this is, it represents only the mechanical aspect of this highly complex process, which is also related to the brain, hearing and nerves. More significant is the fact that it relates to the mind, which we only know by name. We know nothing about its nature or formation, or even about how it functions.

How does a speaker articulate one word? It is a highly complex process, with numerous steps and stages, involving several organs and systems. In some stages it remains unknown to us. It begins with a feeling of a need to utter this word for a specific purpose. This feeling is transmitted in some unknown way from the faculty of perception, or the mind, or the soul to the action centre, i.e. the brain, which in turn issues a command through the nervous system to utter this word. The word itself is part of what God has taught man, as He gave him its meaning. When the command is made, the lungs expel a measure of air that passes from the bronchi, to the trachea, to the larynx where it goes through the vocal cords. These are incomparably superior to the strings of any man-made musical instrument, and indeed to all musical instruments

with their greatly varied sounds. At the larynx, the air movement makes the sound desired by the brain: high or low, fast or slow, coarse or soft, gentle or sharp, etc. This sound now passes through the mouth where certain pressures are applied at different points. The tongue is so agile at this point that it ensures the production of different sounds through pressures at different points of articulation. All this is needed to utter one word, let alone an expression, a sentence, an idea, past and present feelings, etc. Each one of these is an amazing world, initiated by man, the most extraordinary of creatures. It all comes by the grace of God, the Lord of Grace.

The Sun and the Moon

The *sūrah* moves on highlighting God's favours: "*The sun and the moon function in due measure.*" (Verse 5) The accuracy of each such measure and coordinated movement fills us with wonder as we try to appreciate the facts to which this statement refers. The sun is certainly not the largest celestial body. In open space, to which we can offer no definition of boundaries, there are millions upon millions of celestial bodies, many of which are larger and hotter, and produce more light than the sun. Sirius, for example, is 20 times heavier than the sun, and gives off 50 times more light. Arcturus is 80 times bigger in size than the sun and emanates 8,000 times more light. Other celestial bodies are even greater in size, weight and light. Yet for us, the inhabitants of this little planet earth that rely on the sun for light and heat, the sun is the most important of all of these.

The moon is a small satellite of the earth, but has a great influence on its life. It is indeed the most important element in the tidal movements of the sea.

The sizes of both the sun and the moon, their respective temperatures, distances from us and movement in their orbits are most accurately calculated so as to produce their desirable effects on life on earth. Furthermore, they are placed in their proper respective positions in relation to other celestial bodies.

We will now point out some of the accurate measures regarding life on earth. The sun is 92.5 million miles away from the earth. Had it been

nearer, the earth would have been burnt, or melted or evaporated. Had it been further away, all living creatures on earth would have been frozen. The amount of heat that reaches the earth from the sun represents no more than one of two-million parts of the heat emanating from that body. It is this little fraction only that best suits our life here. Had Sirius, in its present size and heat, been placed in the position of the sun, the earth would have evaporated and been lost in space, long ago.

The same applies to the moon. Had it been larger in size, or nearer in position, the tides it effects in the seas would have drowned everything on earth.

The gravity of both the sun and the moon is also an important factor on the earth's stability, position and movement in space. Our solar system moves in space at a speed of 20,000 miles an hour, heading in one direction. Yet it never collides with any other celestial body.

In this great expanse, not a single star or planet moves even a hairbreadth out of orbit. Absolute balance of size and movement is maintained for all celestial bodies. It is just as God Almighty says: "*The sun and the moon function in due measure.*" (Verse 5)

Submissive Universe

"*The stars and the trees prostrate themselves [before Him].*" (Verse 6) The last reference was to the accurate measure observed in the structure of the great universe. Now the reference is to what direction the universe follows. This brief statement contains a highly inspiring reference to an enlightening and fundamental truth.

There is a bond of worship and submission between this universe and its Creator and Originator, God Almighty. The stars and the trees are two examples of creatures that live in the universe. They give a clear idea of the direction the universe follows. Commentators have different views about the meaning of the word *najm*, or star, which occurs in this verse, with some saying that it refers to the stars in the sky, while others claim that it refers to plants that do not stand erect like trees. Whichever interpretation we take the point this verse stresses is the same, identifying the bond between the universe and its Creator. The universe is a living

creature with a soul that differs in degree and nature from one creature to another, but its essence remains the same.

Long ago, the human heart realized this fact about the universe and its soul. This realization is based on the sensitive quality God gave it. This fact, however, became blurred every time man tried to capture it with his mind, in the light of his own experience. Man, however, has recently been able to recognize the unity of the structure of the universe, but he remains far from understanding the nature of the universe's living soul. Scientists tend to believe that the atom is the unit of the universe, and that the atom is essentially radiation. They also believe that movement is the characteristic common to everything in the universe. It is pertinent to ask, then, what goal does the universe try to achieve?

The Qur'ān says that every apparent step of the universe, which is in essence an expression of its spirit, looks up to its Originator. This is stated in numerous verses of the Qur'ān, such as the one we are discussing: "*The stars and the trees prostrate themselves [before Him].*" (Verse 6) Two other such verses expressing the same idea are as follows: "*The seven heavens extol His limitless glory, as does the earth, and all who dwell in them. Indeed every single thing extols His glory and praise, but you cannot understand their praises.*" (17: 44) "*Are you not aware that it is God whose limitless glory all creatures that are in the heavens and earth extol, even the birds as they spread out their wings? Each of them knows how to pray to Him and to glorify Him.*" (24: 41) To contemplate this truth and observe the universe as it worships and glorifies its Lord gives our hearts a special type of comfort and pleasure. We feel a mutual sympathy with everything around us as all looks up to the Lord, the Creator of all. We feel that we are in a friendly universe where everything and all creatures have the same aim. This is a feeling with far reaching and profound effects.

"*He has raised the skies high, and has set the balance, so that you may not exceed the balance. Weigh, therefore, with justice and do not fall short in the balance.*" (Verses 7–9) The reference to the skies is intended, like all other references in the Qur'ān to the two immediate aspects of the universe, to awaken minds and hearts that have become oblivious to the wonders around them, because of long familiarity. These minds and hearts should look at the universe, appreciate its wonderful beauty, harmony and coordination, and glorify the One who initiated all.

Whatever is meant by the skies, the reference to them lifts our sight to the great space above us, which appears without boundaries, and in which float trillions of huge celestial bodies, yet no collision occurs between them, either individually or in clusters. A cluster may include as many as a billion stars, as in the galaxy which includes our own solar system. Our sun has a diameter of 2.3 million kilometres, yet within our galaxy there are many smaller stars and many that are larger by thousands of times. All these stars and clusters of stars and planets move in space at frightening speeds, but in the great space above they are no more than particles floating far apart from each other.

Along with raising the sky high, God has '*set the balance*' of truth. This is well established so as to define the values of things, events and people. Thus, values are measured by the balance of truth, not according to different, ignorant desires or personal preferences. Moreover, this balance is set within human nature and in the divine message advocated by all God's messengers and defined in the Qur'ān. He has set the balance, "*so that you may not exceed the balance,*" going too high or too low. "*Weigh, therefore, with justice and do not fall short in the balance,*" so as to ensure justice to all in all situations.

Thus, the truth on earth and in human life relates to the universe and its structure. It relates to the sky in its abstract significance that points to the source of revelation, and in its physical significance as a manifestation of God's infinite power. The two meanings converge to add further inspiration.

"*He has laid the earth for His creatures, with all its fruits, its palm trees with sheathed clusters, its husked grain and its sweet-smelling plants.*" (Verses 10–12) Because we have lived on earth for so long, and we are well familiar with all that is on it, we do not feel the significance of its being '*laid*' for God's creatures, and to enable us to function so comfortably. Therefore, we do not feel the great significance of the stability of the earth and how much grace God has bestowed on us by such stability unless a volcano erupts or an earthquake occurs, filling us with fear. Only at such times do we fully appreciate God's grace in making the earth stable.

Yet people should remember this truth at every moment. They should remember that this planet where they feel so secure is no more than

to suit. Therefore, when God reminds humans and *jinn* of His favour of having created them, He is referring to a blessing that is beyond comprehension.

God – all glory belongs to Him – then states the substances used for creating humans and *jinn*. These are also created by God. Man is created from clay that has dried and gives a sound when beaten with a stick or the human hand. The verse may refer to a stage in the process of creation from dust or clay, or it may simply be a reference to the fact that man and the earth are made of the same material.

> Modern science has proven that the human body contains the same elements as the earth, including carbon, oxygen, hydrogen, phosphorus, sulphur, nitrogen, calcium, potassium, sodium, chlorine, magnesium, iron, manganese, copper, iodine, fluorine, cobalt, zinc, silicon and aluminium. These are the same elements that form dust. Their proportions differ from one person to another. Needless to say, they differ in man from dust. Yet they are the same elements.[1]

What science has proven should not be taken as the ultimate interpretation of the Qur'ānic text. The fact to which the Qur'ān refers may mean what has been scientifically proven, or it may mean something totally different. It may refer to another of the numerous aspects that endorse the meaning of man's creation out of dust, or wet or dry clay.

We stress, most emphatically, that we must not limit the meaning of a Qur'ānic text to a scientific discovery that admits the possibility of error, or the possibility of change with human progress. Some scholars with sincere intentions try to highlight that Qur'ānic statements give identical import to scientific discoveries, proven or still under observation. They cite this as a proof of the miraculous nature of the Qur'ān. What we say is that the Qur'ān is miraculous, whether its statements are confirmed by scientific discoveries or not. What the Qur'ān says is broader in scope than what science says at any one time. Scientific discoveries are always subject to amendment and change, and sometimes they are proven erroneous. We can certainly use science to broaden our understanding

1. Nawfal, 'Abd al-Razzāq, *Allah wal-'ilm al-Ḥadīth*, Cairo, (n.d.), p. 180.

of Qur'ānic texts, whenever it explains some aspects of the wonders pertaining to man and the universe. We must not, however, say that a certain Qur'ānic text refers only to a particular scientific discovery. All that we can say is that the scientific discovery may be part of what the Qur'ānic text refers to.

As for the creation of the *jinn* from raging flames of fire, this is something beyond human knowledge. The only source on this is the Qur'ān, given by God who knows what He has created. The fire is described here as *mārij*, which means lit and moving like flames in a windy place. The *jinn* have been given the ability to live on this earth, together with man. However, we do not know how the *jinn* live. What is certain, though, is that they are also addressed by the Qur'ān; it is as much a message to them as it is to man. We explained this in Volume XV, when discussing the verse that says: "*We sent to you a group of* jinn *to listen to the Qur'ān. When they heard it, they said to one another, 'Listen in silence!' When the recitation ended, they returned to their people to warn them.*" (46: 29) This is also confirmed in this *sūrah*.

The address here is to both *jinn* and humans, reminding both of God's blessing in their creation out of their respective origins. This is the central blessing, which brings with it all other blessings. Therefore, it is followed by the comment that signifies putting their testimony on record: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verse 16) Needless to say, denial is pointless.

"*He is the Lord of the two risings and the Lord of the two settings. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verses 17–18) This reference fills our hearts with great feelings of God's presence, wherever we turn or move, and wherever we look on the wide horizon. Wherever something rises or sets, there is God, the Lord of all, the Sovereign who extends His light and guidance to all. The two risings and two settings may refer to the rising and setting of the sun and the moon, considering that both have already been mentioned in the *sūrah* as part of God's blessings. The verse may also be understood as a reference to the two different positions of sunrise and sunset in summer and winter respectively.

Be that as it may, the import of this reference is more worthy of attention. It points to the fact that God's hand controls stars, planets

and everything else in the universe. His Lordship is seen more clearly on the horizon. When we contemplate universal phenomena and look at the stars rising and setting, our hearts, minds and souls are filled with greater reassurance.

God's Lordship of the two risings and the two settings reflects some of His blessings. Hence, the comment familiar in this *sūrah* is repeated: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verse 18) The two risings and settings are not only signs pointing to God, but are also part of His blessings granted to humans and *jinn*. They bring much good to all inhabitants of the earth. We see how life begins with the sun rising. It certainly also needs the sunset. Should either one of them, or both, suffer some dysfunction, life itself would be disrupted.

Blessings in Seas and Rivers

We now turn back to the earth and its waters, which God has made in exact measure that determines quantity, type, how it runs and how it is used:

> *He has given freedom to the two great bodies of water, so that they may meet; yet between them is a barrier which they do not cross. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? Pearls and corals come from both. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? His are the lofty ships that sail like floating mountains through the seas. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?* (Verses 19–25)

The two bodies of water, expressed in the Arabic text as '*the two seas*', are in fact the salty bodies of water including seas and oceans and the unsalty ones or rivers. God left them free to run and to meet, but did not allow them to exceed their limits. Each will fulfil its own function. In between them there is a barrier of the same nature, which God has put in place. The quantities of water on earth are not the result of any coincidence; they are determined by exact measure. Salty waters cover three-quarters of the earth's surface and they are mostly connected, while dry land represents only about one quarter of the earth. This very large quantity of salty water is the amount needed to keep the earth's atmosphere clean and suitable for supporting life.

> In spite of all the gaseous emanations from the earth of all the ages, most of them poisonous, the atmosphere remains practically uncontaminated and unchanging in its balanced relationship necessary to man's very existence. The great balance wheel is that vast mass of water, the sea.[2]

From this great mass of water evaporation takes place because of the heat of the sun, and what evaporates comes back in the form of rain which is the source of sweet water in all its forms, the most important of which finds its way into rivers. The careful proportion of the vastness of the sea, the heat of the sun, the cold temperatures in the upper atmosphere and other climatic conditions produce rain that provides unsalty waters, which is the mainstay of life for plants, animals and man.

Almost all rivers end in the sea, transporting various salts and compounds from land to sea. Thus, rivers do not change the nature of sea water. Normally rivers run at a higher elevation than sea level. Thus, the sea does not encroach on a river's course, flooding it with salty water. Had that been the case, the nature of rivers would have altered and their function ceased. In between the two there is always this barrier which God has put in place, ensuring that these two water bodies continue to fulfil their respective natural functions. It is no wonder that all this is mentioned here as being among God's great blessings: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verse 21)

The *sūrah* also adds here some of the blessings God has placed in these two bodies of water, some of which can easily be seen: "*Pearls and corals come from both.*" (Verse 22) The pearl is originally formed by a mollusc animal.

> Perhaps the pearl is one of the most marvellous wonders of the sea. The mollusc goes to the bottom of the sea inside its hard shell which keeps it safe from danger. It is different from other animals in form and life pattern. It has a fine, wonderful net, similar to that of a fisherman, which allows air, water and food to enter, but

2. Morrison, A.C., *Man Does not Stand Alone*, The World's Work, Surrey, p. 28.

stops sand, stone and similarly unwanted objects. Below it are the mouths of the animal, each with four lips. Should a grain of sand or a small stone or a harmful organism get through the net, the mollusc immediately covers it with a sticky discharge which then solidifies to form a pearl. The size of the pearl differs according to the size of the foreign object that finds its way inside.[3]

Coral is among God's amazing creation. It is found in the sea at depths ranging from 5 to 300 metres. It fixes its lower edge to a rock or weeds, keeping its mouth at the top. Around its mouth it has several protrusions used to capture food. Should a little creature touch any of these protrusions, it is immediately paralysed and sticks to the protrusion, which then shrinks and bends towards the coral mouth where the paralysed prey is pushed through a small passage similar to man's oesophagus.

Coral reproduces itself by discharging reproductive cells which fertilize the eggs, and the baby coral will then stick itself to a stone or a weed, starting an independent life like its mother.

Another sign of God's wonderful creation is that corals reproduce in another way, producing extensions that remain stuck to the main body. Thus the coral tree is formed with a wide trunk and narrower branches that may become very fine. The coral tree can reach 30 centimetres in length. Coral concentrations differ in colour: some are orange, some are of red carnation colour, some emerald blue, and others pale and dusty in colour. Red coral is the solid stem that remains after the living part has died. Coral stone-like concentrations can form large colonies. One of these is a chain of coral rocks known as the Great Barrier Reef, to the north east of Australia. The reef is 1,350 miles long and 50 miles wide.[4]

Man makes precious jewellery from both pearls and corals. God mentions both as part of His blessings and the *sūrah* adds here the usual comment: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verse 23)

3. Nawfal, op. cit., p. 105.
4. Nawfal, ibid., pp. 106–107.

The *sūrah* then mentions the ships that sail through the sea, some of which are very large, looking like mountains: "*His are the lofty ships that sail like floating mountains through the seas.*" (Verse 24) The *sūrah* refers to these floating ships as belonging to God. They indeed sail by God's will. Nothing keeps them afloat in the sea, through its waves and currents except God's care. Hence, they belong to Him. They remain among the great favours with which He blesses human life. They provide a means of livelihood, transportation and comfort that people cannot deny. Hence, the comment: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verse 25)

The Eternal

Having taken us on this round in the great universe, referring to different types of creatures that will inevitably die, the *sūrah* now mentions the only One who is eternal, and to whom all glory and majesty belong. As we see death overtaking all creatures, we are conscious of the truth of God, the Eternal:

> *All that lives on it perishes; but forever will remain the face of your Lord, full of majesty, granting grace. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?* (Verses 26–28)

All sounds become hushed, breathing faint, and limbs stop moving. The air of death spreads over all living creatures, stopping every move throughout the heavens and earth. Only the majesty of the Eternal face overshadows all creatures, time, place and the entire universe. Human expression cannot depict the scene. It cannot add to the Qur'ānic text which gives us a feeling of humble tranquillity, complete silence and total majesty. It paints a scene of total emptiness that leaves the whole universe motionless after it had been bustling with life. Yet it instils in us an image which we cannot understand from our experience but can comprehend. The same comment is added, as the *sūrah* considers the full understanding of this fact to be one of the blessings humans and *jinn* are reminded of: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?* (Verse 28)

It is indeed a blessing; nay, it is the source of all blessings. It is this Eternal Existence that creates all and gives them their special characteristics, systems, forms and laws. It is what determines their fate and destiny. God the Eternal is the One who creates, originates, protects and looks after His creation, holds them to account and gives them their reward. It is then the truth of His being the Eternal that gives all blessings. Indeed this world and all its affairs are put in place as a result of the truth of God's eternity while all else comes to an end.

Appeals from All

The truth of God's eternity gives rise to another truth: all creatures are bound to perish and, therefore, they all address everything related to their existence to the One who is without equal, eternal and in control of everything in the universe:

> *Everyone in heaven and earth entreats Him. Every day He manifests Himself in some wonderful way. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?"* (Verses 29–30)

They all address their entreaties and appeals to Him alone because He is the only One to receive such requests. All else will perish, so they cannot be addressed with such appeals. He is the only One to answer requests, and none who appeals to Him alone will ever end in failure. Anyone who entreats or appeals to someone other than God is utterly in error. What can a creature that will inevitably perish do to another who will also perish? What can one in need give to another also in need?

All glory to Him, He manifests Himself every day in a different way. This universe, the limits of which are unknown to us, is in its entirety subject to His will, functioning under His control. Such control applies generally to the universe as a whole, and applies at the same time to every individual creature on its own, and to every organ, cell and molecule in every individual. He gives everything its due, assigns to it its function and watches how it fulfils that function. Such controls monitor every shoot that comes out of the earth, every leaf that falls, every grain in the earth's deep darkness, every fresh or dry thing, every fish at sea, worm in

the ground, every insect, beast or bird in their hiding places, every egg, chick, feather and cell in everything that lives. The One who controls all is never preoccupied with something so as to turn aside from some other thing. Nothing hidden or manifest ever escapes His knowledge. Part of what He controls is the affairs of His creatures on earth, humans and *jinn*. Hence He records this blessing as He addresses them: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verse 30)

A Frightening Threat

Having stated this fundamental truth of God's eternity while everything else perishes and its correlate making clear that He controls all the affairs of all His creatures, the *sūrah* begins a new section that starts with a threat that sends fear into all hearts. This is a prelude to the discussion of the Day of Judgement that follows later in the *sūrah*:

> *We shall attend to you two huge communities [of* jinn *and mankind]. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?* Jinn *and mankind, if you can pass beyond the regions of heaven and earth, then do so. You cannot pass beyond them without authority. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? A flash of fire will be sent against you, and molten brass, and you will be left without support. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?* (Verses 31–36)

"*We shall attend to you two huge communities [of* jinn *and mankind].*" (Verse 31) What a frightening threat that neither man nor *jinn* can face. Indeed firm mountains, stars and galaxies tremble to hear it. God Almighty, in all His power and majesty, says that He will attend to the reckoning of these two humble creatures, man and *jinn*, giving His statement an air of warning! It is unimaginably terrible!

A more literal translation of the threat would say: "We shall be free to attend to you two..." God – limitless is He in His glory – is not preoccupied with something so as to need to free Himself of what preoccupies Him. This is merely an expression intended to make it easier for us to understand, and to deliver the warning in a stunning and crushing way. This entire universe was originated and put in place with

a single word, 'Be', and once the word was uttered the whole universe came into existence. Likewise, its total disappearance needs nothing more than the command to be issued once, in less than the twinkling of an eye. What can happen, then, to these two communities of creatures, man and *jinn*, when God attends fully to them alone, administering their punishment? Under the shadow of this fearful threat, they are both asked: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verse 32)

The *sūrah* continues with this frightening tone, challenging both man and *jinn* to pass beyond their own world: "Jinn *and mankind, if you can pass beyond the regions of heaven and earth, then do so.*" (Verse 33) How, and where to? "*You cannot pass beyond them without authority.*" (Verse 33) No authority can be given except by the One who has it. Once more, they are faced with the question: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verse 34) Do they have, within themselves, anything that amounts to a lie to say, or even a word to utter? Nonetheless the onslaught continues to the end, adding further threats and revealing their miserable end: "*A flash of fire will be sent against you, and molten brass, and you will be left without support. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verses 35–36) The horror painted in this image is beyond the scope of human imagination, or any creature's imagination for that matter. It is a unique image. Although there are a few images akin to it in the Qur'ān, none are exactly similar to this one: "*Leave Me alone with those who deny the truth and enjoy life's blessings.*" (73: 11) "*Leave Me alone [to deal] with him whom I have created alone.*" (74: 11) The fact remains that this present verse, and the warning it implies, is far more frightful: "*We shall attend to you two huge communities [of* jinn *and mankind].*" (Verse 31)

The Last Day

The *sūrah* devotes its remaining part to images and scenes of the Last Day, starting with a universal upheaval, followed by images of reckoning, requital and reward. This commences with an image of the universe that fits with the opening of the *sūrah*: "*When the sky is rent asunder and becomes rose-red like [burning] oil.*" (Verse 37) We are introduced to a picture of the sky turning rose-red or looking like a red rose and

flowing like oil. The sum of the verses describing the universe on the Day of Judgement confirm the total destruction of all celestial bodies, after they break loose of the system which controls their operation and coordinates their orbits and movements. One of these verses is the one we are now discussing. Others may be cited, such as: "*When the earth is violently shaken and the mountains crumble away and scatter abroad into fine dust.*" (56: 4–6) "*When eyes are dazzled, and the moon eclipsed, and the sun and the moon are brought together.*" (75: 7–9) "*When the sun is darkened, when the stars fall and disperse, when the mountains are made to move away, when the camels, ten months pregnant, are left untended, when the wild beasts are brought together, when the seas are set alight.*" (81: 1–6) "*When the sky is cleft asunder, when the stars are scattered, when the oceans are made to explode...*" (82: 1–3) "*When the sky is rent asunder, obeying her Lord in true submission; when the earth is stretched out and casts forth all that is within her and becomes empty, obeying her Lord in true submission!*" (84: 1–5) All these verses, and many others, refer to this great event that will overcome the entire universe, the nature of which is known only to God.

"*When the sky is rent asunder and becomes rose-red like [burning] oil.*" (Verse 37) The same question is again asked: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verse 38) No denial can then be either contemplated or uttered.

"*On that day neither mankind nor* jinn *will be asked about their sins.*" (Verse 39) This applies to a particular situation on that day when all will be present. It is a day with different situations: in some people will be questioned and in some others no question will be put to them. In some, every soul will argue its own case, trying to put the blame on its associates, and in others no word of argument or dispute will be allowed. It is a long, extended day, with many positions and situations, each of which is awesome, and each is witnessed by multitudes of creatures. This verse speaks of a particular situation when no human or *jinn* will be asked about their sins. Everything is already well known, and the deeds of all are out in the open. Signs of misery appear as black on some faces, and signs of triumph appear white on others. Every face tells of what is going to happen. Can there by any denial on that day?

Hence, the question: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verse 40)

"*The guilty ones will be known by their mark and shall be seized by their forelocks and their feet.*" (Verse 41) This is a scene that combines force with humiliation: forelocks and feet are tied together and the guilty are so cast into hell. Can there be any denial then? As this is going on, the *sūrah* addresses its audience, as if they are witnessing this continuing process of casting the guilty, with their forelocks and feet combined, into hell: "*This is the hell which the guilty deny.*" (Verse 43) It is present here, as you are now seeing it. "*They will go round between its flames and scalding water.*" (Verse 44) It is exceedingly hot; they have nowhere to go other than round and between the flames and scorching fluids. Look at them as they go round now: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verse 45)

This is all that is said about those enduring this most painful suffering. The *sūrah* then turns its attention to those enjoying honour and bliss.

The Four Gardens

For the first time in the Qur'ān so far two gardens are mentioned, and there are probably more within the great garden of heaven. Their mention here, in particular, may be to stress their importance. In the next *sūrah*, The Inevitable Event, we learn that the dwellers of heaven form two large groups: the ones to the fore who will be brought nearest to God, and the people to the right. Each will experience great bliss. Here also we feel that these two gardens are designated for a group with a high position. It may be the group described in the next *sūrah* as being closest to God. We see another two gardens which are less refined than the first two and we feel that they belong to a group that comes next to the ones already mentioned. This group may be the people to the right. Whatever the case may be, let us look at this first grouping of two gardens, feeling their bliss. They are "*With shading branches.*" (Verse 48) The Arabic word used for branches, *afnān*, conveys in particular newly springing branches that spread an air of freshness. These gardens have "*a pair of flowing springs.*" (Verse 50) Thus, they are never short of water.

Moreover, they are "*With every kind of fruit in pairs.*" (Verse 52) Their fruits are plentiful and varied. How will the dwellers of these gardens live? "*They will recline on carpets lined with rich brocade.*" (Verse 54) Such is the lining of their couches: the top is left to our imagination. And then "*the fruit of both these gardens will be within easy reach.*" (Verse 54) It is near and easy to reach.

This, however, does not complete the aspects of luxury that await these people. There is still more to consider: "*In both [gardens] will be mates of modest gaze, whom neither man nor* jinn *will have touched before.*" (Verse 56) Their modest gaze reflects their chastity. They do not look to anyone other than their spouses. Besides, they instil a sense of luxury and brightness, appearing "*like rubies and corals.*" (Verse 58)

All this comes as the reward for a person who stands in this life in fear of his Lord's presence and worships Him as if he sees Him. He feels that God sees him and he works to attain the superior grade of excellence that the Prophet described as "to worship God as if you see Him. If you do not, then know that He sees you." As such they deserve more from the Lord of Grace for their excellence: "*Shall the reward of good be anything but good?*" (Verse 60)

In this presentation of these two lofty gardens and what they contain, every aspect of blessing and comfort is followed by the familiar comment: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verse 61)

The *sūrah* then describes what the other group, also with two gardens, will have: "*Besides these two there are two other gardens.*" (Verse 62) The description shows them to be in some way less than the first two: "*Both of the deepest green.*" (Verse 64) Their green colour is very dark, almost black. They have "*two gushing springs.*" (Verse 66) Their water gushes forth, which is again different from, or less than, the flowing water of the springs in the first two gardens. Here we have "*fruits, date-palms and pomegranate trees,* (Verse 68) while we had there "*every kind of fruit in pairs.*" (Verse 52) Moreover, "*there will be in [these gardens] all things most excellent and beautiful.*" (Verse 70) Further aspects are added in the next verse: "*[They will have] dark-eyed and modest companions, sheltered in pavilions.*" (Verse 72) The pavilions, or decorated tents, add connotations of bedouin luxury, gratifying those used to desert life. The mates they have here are '*sheltered*', while the ones in the other two gardens are '*of*

modest gaze'. However both groups of mates share in the same qualities of chastity and faithful devotion: "*Neither man nor* jinn *will have touched them before*." (Verse 74)

We see the dwellers of these two gardens enjoying their luxuries: "*They will recline on green cushions and fine carpets*." (Verse 76) The fine quality of the carpets in these gardens is given a special description in Arabic, *'abqarī*, which is an adjective used of the 'Abqar Valley; in olden times the Arabs believed this to be the dwelling place of the *jinn*. Hence they attributed every marvellous thing to this valley, describing it as *'abqarī*, as the carpets are here described. When compared with what the first two gardens contain, these are clearly more modest. Yet the familiar comment is added after every aspect of blessing mentioned here: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verse 77)

The *sūrah* concludes with a final note of glorification of the Lord whose face, full of majesty, will remain after all creation has perished. This is the most apt conclusion to a *sūrah* that bears the name of the Lord of Grace: "*Blessed is the name of your Lord, full of majesty, granting grace*." (Verse 78)

SŪRAH 56

Al-Wāqi ʿah

(The Inevitable Event)

Prologue

Al-Wāqiʿah, The Inevitable Event, is the name given to this Makkan *sūrah* explaining its subject matter. The main issue discussed is resurrection. The *sūrah* specifically refutes the argument of those who doubt it, denying the Qur'ān and associating partners with God. They always wonder: "*What! When we have died and become mere dust and bones, are we to be raised up again? And our forefathers, too?*" (Verses 47–48) Therefore, the *sūrah* begins by describing resurrection, giving it a name, *al-wāqiʿah,* that makes its happening absolutely clear, leaving no room for doubt: "*When that which is certain to happen will have come to pass no one will then deny its having come to pass.*" (Verses 1–2) It highlights the events that distinguish that day from all others: people's positions are totally changed, as is the earth's appearance. These fearful events produce a different earth and entirely new values: "*abasing [some], exalting [others]. When the earth is violently shaken and the mountains crumble away and scatter abroad into fine dust, you shall be divided into three classes.*" (Verses 3–7)

The *sūrah* then describes the fates of these three classes, the ones to the fore, those to the right and those to the left. It gives us a very detailed description of what they receive of favours and blessings, or misery and suffering. This makes us feel that it will all undoubtedly happen, and

especially as every detail is set before our eyes. The unbelievers are made to see their fate and that of the believers and hear what is said about them after detailing their misery: "*In times gone by, they overindulged in luxury and persisted in heinous sin, saying, 'What! When we have died and become mere dust and bones, are we to be raised up again? And our forefathers, too?*" (Verses 45–48) The description gives the impression that the punishment is being meted out now and that life on earth is long gone, mentioned only to show how hideous and repugnant some people's way of life was.

Thus ends the first part of the *sūrah*. The second part discusses the question of faith in its entirety, placing particular emphasis on the main topic, i.e. resurrection. The *sūrah* then makes a number of highly effective touches, pinpointing matters that all people know and see, whatever their environment and level of experience. It cites the beginning of each person's life journey with the discharge of semen, and shows their death only to be replaced by a new generation. This is cited as evidence of the second life, which is just as easy and simple as the first one, which they all know. The *sūrah* then cites the evidence provided by plants and agriculture, which is an initiation of a certain form of life by God's will. Had He willed, it would not have come about and would not have yielded its fruit. Next, water is cited; this commodity is necessary for all life. Its availability is totally dependent on God's will since it is He who sends it down from the clouds. Had He willed, He would have made it salty, unsuitable for bringing about or sustaining life. Finally, fire is cited together with its basic material, the trees. At this point, a warning is given reminding them of the fire of hell which they doubt. All these images are familiar to them, and they are only asked to reflect on how they come about by God's will.

This part also speaks about the Qur'ān, which tells them about the inevitable event yet still they doubt its warnings. A very serious oath follows, emphasizing that these revelations constitute a noble reading preserved in a well-guarded record, touched only by purified angels.

As the *sūrah* draws to a close, it paints a very powerful scene of man's situation at the point of death, when his soul is in his throat. All those around him stand helpless, unable to assist. They know nothing about what is happening inside or to this person. As he is about to depart this

life, none other than God can do aught to him. He sees his path ahead, but he cannot say anything about what he sees.

The *sūrah* concludes by re-emphasizing the true news, adding further glorification of God, the Supreme: "*This is surely the indubitable truth. Extol, then, the glory of the name of your Lord, the Supreme.*" (Verses 95–96) It thus ensures that the beginning and the end form a perfect harmony.

Al-Wāqi'ah
(The Inevitable Event)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

When that which is certain to happen will have come to pass (1)

no one will then deny its having come to pass, (2)

abasing [some], exalting [others]. (3)

When the earth is violently shaken (4)

and the mountains crumble away (5)

and scatter abroad into fine dust, (6)

you shall be divided into three classes: (7)

There are the people of the right side: what people are they? (8)

And the people of the left side: what people are they? (9)

And there are those to the fore, who shall be foremost. (10)

وَٱلسَّٰبِقُونَ ٱلسَّٰبِقُونَ ﴿١٠﴾

These will be brought nearest to God, (11)

أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ ٱلْمُقَرَّبُونَ ﴿١١﴾

in gardens of bliss. (12)

فِى جَنَّٰتِ ٱلنَّعِيمِ ﴿١٢﴾

A good many of them are from earlier times (13)

ثُلَّةٌ مِّنَ ٱلْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿١٣﴾

and a few from later generations. (14)

وَقَلِيلٌ مِّنَ ٱلْءَاخِرِينَ ﴿١٤﴾

On gold-encrusted couches (15)

عَلَىٰ سُرُرٍ مَّوْضُونَةٍ ﴿١٥﴾

they will recline facing each other. (16)

مُّتَّكِـِٔينَ عَلَيْهَا مُتَقَٰبِلِينَ ﴿١٦﴾

Immortal youths shall wait upon them (17)

يَطُوفُ عَلَيْهِمْ وِلْدَٰنٌ مُّخَلَّدُونَ ﴿١٧﴾

with goblets, ewers, and cups filled with water from unsullied springs. (18)

بِأَكْوَابٍ وَأَبَارِيقَ وَكَأْسٍ مِّن مَّعِينٍ ﴿١٨﴾

From it they will not be dispersed, nor will they be in short supply. (19)

لَّا يُصَدَّعُونَ عَنْهَا وَلَا يُنزِفُونَ ﴿١٩﴾

And with fruit of any kind they may choose, (20)

وَفَٰكِهَةٍ مِّمَّا يَتَخَيَّرُونَ ﴿٢٠﴾

and with the meat of any fowl they may desire. (21)

وَلَحْمِ طَيْرٍ مِّمَّا يَشْتَهُونَ ﴿٢١﴾

There will be for them companions with large beautiful eyes (22)

وَحُورٌ عِينٌ ﴿٢٢﴾

like hidden pearls: (23)

كَأَمْثَٰلِ ٱللُّؤْلُوِ ٱلْمَكْنُونِ ﴿٢٣﴾

a reward for what they used to do. (24)

جَزَآءًۢ بِمَا كَانُوا۟ يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٢٤﴾

There they will hear no idle talk, no sinful speech, (25)

لَا يَسْمَعُونَ فِيهَا لَغْوًا وَلَا تَأْثِيمًا ﴿٢٥﴾

only the saying, 'Peace! Peace'. (26)

إِلَّا قِيلًا سَلَٰمًا سَلَٰمًا ﴿٢٦﴾

As for those on the right, what people are they? (27)

وَأَصْحَٰبُ ٱلْيَمِينِ مَآ أَصْحَٰبُ ٱلْيَمِينِ ﴿٢٧﴾

They will dwell amid thornless lote trees (28)

فِى سِدْرٍ مَّخْضُودٍ ﴿٢٨﴾

and flower-clad acacias (29)

وَطَلْحٍ مَّنضُودٍ ﴿٢٩﴾

with extended shade, (30)

وَظِلٍّ مَّمْدُودٍ ﴿٣٠﴾

constantly flowing water, (31)

وَمَآءٍ مَّسْكُوبٍ ﴿٣١﴾

abundant fruits, (32)

وَفَٰكِهَةٍ كَثِيرَةٍ ﴿٣٢﴾

unfailing, never out of reach, (33)

لَّا مَقْطُوعَةٍ وَلَا مَمْنُوعَةٍ ﴿٣٣﴾

[reclining on] couches raised high. (34)	وَفُرُشٍ مَّرْفُوعَةٍ ﴿٣٤﴾
We will have brought forth [their mates] in perfect creation, (35)	إِنَّآ أَنشَأْنَٰهُنَّ إِنشَآءً ﴿٣٥﴾
making them virgins, (36)	فَجَعَلْنَٰهُنَّ أَبْكَارًا ﴿٣٦﴾
full of love, of matching age, (37)	عُرُبًا أَتْرَابًا ﴿٣٧﴾
for those on the right. (38)	لِّأَصْحَٰبِ ٱلْيَمِينِ ﴿٣٨﴾
A good many of them are from earlier times (39)	ثُلَّةٌ مِّنَ ٱلْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿٣٩﴾
and a good many from later generations. (40)	وَثُلَّةٌ مِّنَ ٱلْءَاخِرِينَ ﴿٤٠﴾
And those on the left, what people are they? (41)	وَأَصْحَٰبُ ٱلشِّمَالِ مَآ أَصْحَٰبُ ٱلشِّمَالِ ﴿٤١﴾
They will dwell amid scorching wind and scalding water (42)	فِى سَمُومٍ وَحَمِيمٍ ﴿٤٢﴾
in the shadows of black smoke, (43)	وَظِلٍّ مِّن يَحْمُومٍ ﴿٤٣﴾
neither cool nor refreshing. (44)	لَّا بَارِدٍ وَلَا كَرِيمٍ ﴿٤٤﴾
In times gone by, they overindulged in luxury (45)	إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا۟ قَبْلَ ذَٰلِكَ مُتْرَفِينَ ﴿٤٥﴾

and persisted in heinous sin, (46)

وَكَانُوا۟ يُصِرُّونَ عَلَى ٱلْحِنثِ ٱلْعَظِيمِ ﴿٤٦﴾

saying, 'What! When we have died and become mere dust and bones, are we to be raised up again? (47)

وَكَانُوا۟ يَقُولُونَ أَئِذَا مِتْنَا وَكُنَّا تُرَابًا وَعِظَٰمًا أَءِنَّا لَمَبْعُوثُونَ ﴿٤٧﴾

And our forefathers, too? (48)

أَوَءَابَآؤُنَا ٱلْأَوَّلُونَ ﴿٤٨﴾

Say: 'All people of the earliest and latest generations (49)

قُلْ إِنَّ ٱلْأَوَّلِينَ وَٱلْءَاخِرِينَ ﴿٤٩﴾

will indeed be gathered together at an appointed time on a specific day. (50)

لَمَجْمُوعُونَ إِلَىٰ مِيقَٰتِ يَوْمٍ مَّعْلُومٍ ﴿٥٠﴾

Then, you who have gone astray and denied the truth (51)

ثُمَّ إِنَّكُمْ أَيُّهَا ٱلضَّآلُّونَ ٱلْمُكَذِّبُونَ ﴿٥١﴾

will eat from the fruit of the Zaqqūm tree, (52)

لَءَاكِلُونَ مِن شَجَرٍ مِّن زَقُّومٍ ﴿٥٢﴾

filling your bellies with it, (53)

فَمَالِـُٔونَ مِنْهَا ٱلْبُطُونَ ﴿٥٣﴾

and will drink scalding water; (54)

فَشَٰرِبُونَ عَلَيْهِ مِنَ ٱلْحَمِيمِ ﴿٥٤﴾

yet you will drink it like insatiably thirsty camels drink.' (55)

فَشَٰرِبُونَ شُرْبَ ٱلْهِيمِ ﴿٥٥﴾

Such will be their dwelling place on the Day of Judgement. (56)

هَٰذَا نُزُلُهُمْ يَوْمَ ٱلدِّينِ ﴿٥٦﴾

It is We who have created you: will you not believe? (57)

نَحْنُ خَلَقْنَٰكُمْ فَلَوْلَا تُصَدِّقُونَ ٥٧

Consider the semen you discharge: (58)

أَفَرَءَيْتُم مَّا تُمْنُونَ ٥٨

do you create it, or are We the Creator? (59)

ءَأَنتُمْ تَخْلُقُونَهُۥٓ أَمْ نَحْنُ ٱلْخَٰلِقُونَ ٥٩

We have decreed that death shall be among you. Nothing can prevent Us (60)

نَحْنُ قَدَّرْنَا بَيْنَكُمُ ٱلْمَوْتَ وَمَا نَحْنُ بِمَسْبُوقِينَ ٦٠

from replacing you by others like yourselves or bringing you into being anew in a way unknown to you. (61)

عَلَىٰٓ أَن نُّبَدِّلَ أَمْثَٰلَكُمْ وَنُنشِئَكُمْ فِى مَا لَا تَعْلَمُونَ ٦١

You have learned how you have come into being in the first instance. Why, then, do you not reflect? (62)

وَلَقَدْ عَلِمْتُمُ ٱلنَّشْأَةَ ٱلْأُولَىٰ فَلَوْلَا تَذَكَّرُونَ ٦٢

Consider the seeds you sow in the ground: (63)

أَفَرَءَيْتُم مَّا تَحْرُثُونَ ٦٣

is it you who makes them grow, or We? (64)

ءَأَنتُمْ تَزْرَعُونَهُۥٓ أَمْ نَحْنُ ٱلزَّٰرِعُونَ ٦٤

Were it Our will, We could turn it into chaff and leave you to wail, (65)

لَوْ نَشَآءُ لَجَعَلْنَٰهُ حُطَٰمًا فَظَلْتُمْ تَفَكَّهُونَ ٦٥

'We are burdened with debt; (66)

إِنَّا لَمُغْرَمُونَ ٦٦

we have been deprived.' (67)

بَلْ نَحْنُ مَحْرُومُونَ ﴿٦٧﴾

Consider the water you drink: (68)

أَفَرَءَيْتُمُ ٱلْمَآءَ ٱلَّذِى تَشْرَبُونَ ﴿٦٨﴾

is it you who brings it down from the clouds, or We? (69)

ءَأَنتُمْ أَنزَلْتُمُوهُ مِنَ ٱلْمُزْنِ أَمْ نَحْنُ ٱلْمُنزِلُونَ ﴿٦٩﴾

Were it Our will, We could make it salty and bitter. Why, then, do you not give thanks? (70)

لَوْ نَشَآءُ جَعَلْنَٰهُ أُجَاجًا فَلَوْلَا تَشْكُرُونَ ﴿٧٠﴾

Consider the fire you kindle: (71)

أَفَرَءَيْتُمُ ٱلنَّارَ ٱلَّتِى تُورُونَ ﴿٧١﴾

is it you who grows its tree, or We? (72)

ءَأَنتُمْ أَنشَأْتُمْ شَجَرَتَهَآ أَمْ نَحْنُ ٱلْمُنشِـُٔونَ ﴿٧٢﴾

We made it a reminder for man, and a comfort for desert travellers. (73)

نَحْنُ جَعَلْنَٰهَا تَذْكِرَةً وَمَتَٰعًا لِّلْمُقْوِينَ ﴿٧٣﴾

Extol, then, the glory of the name of your Lord, the Supreme. (74)

فَسَبِّحْ بِٱسْمِ رَبِّكَ ٱلْعَظِيمِ ﴿٧٤﴾

I do swear by the positions of the stars (75)

فَلَآ أُقْسِمُ بِمَوَٰقِعِ ٱلنُّجُومِ ﴿٧٥﴾

– a mighty oath, if you but knew it! – (76)

وَإِنَّهُۥ لَقَسَمٌ لَّوْ تَعْلَمُونَ عَظِيمٌ ﴿٧٦﴾

that this is indeed a most honourable Qur'ān, (77)	إِنَّهُۥ لَقُرۡءَانٞ كَرِيمٞ ﴿٧٧﴾
in a well-guarded record (78)	فِي كِتَٰبٖ مَّكۡنُونٖ ﴿٧٨﴾
that only the purified can touch: (79)	لَّا يَمَسُّهُۥٓ إِلَّا ٱلۡمُطَهَّرُونَ ﴿٧٩﴾
a revelation from the Lord of all the worlds. (80)	تَنزِيلٞ مِّن رَّبِّ ٱلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٨٠﴾
Would you look on this discourse with disdain? (81)	أَفَبِهَٰذَا ٱلۡحَدِيثِ أَنتُم مُّدۡهِنُونَ ﴿٨١﴾
Do you make it your livelihood that you persistently deny it? (82)	وَتَجۡعَلُونَ رِزۡقَكُمۡ أَنَّكُمۡ تُكَذِّبُونَ ﴿٨٢﴾
When the soul [of a dying person] comes up to the throat (83)	فَلَوۡلَآ إِذَا بَلَغَتِ ٱلۡحُلۡقُومَ ﴿٨٣﴾
while you are helplessly looking on (84)	وَأَنتُمۡ حِينَئِذٖ تَنظُرُونَ ﴿٨٤﴾
We are closer to him than you, although you do not see Us. (85)	وَنَحۡنُ أَقۡرَبُ إِلَيۡهِ مِنكُمۡ وَلَٰكِن لَّا تُبۡصِرُونَ ﴿٨٥﴾
Why, if you think you are not to be judged, (86)	فَلَوۡلَآ إِن كُنتُمۡ غَيۡرَ مَدِينِينَ ﴿٨٦﴾
can you not restore that [ebbing life], if what you claim is true? (87)	تَرۡجِعُونَهَآ إِن كُنتُمۡ صَٰدِقِينَ ﴿٨٧﴾

If that dying person is one of those who are drawn close to God, (88)	فَأَمَّآ إِن كَانَ مِنَ ٱلْمُقَرَّبِينَ ﴿٨٨﴾
he will have repose, fulfilment and a garden of bliss. (89)	فَرَوْحٌ وَرَيْحَانٌ وَجَنَّتُ نَعِيمٍ ﴿٨٩﴾
If he is one of those on the right, (90)	وَأَمَّآ إِن كَانَ مِنْ أَصْحَٰبِ ٱلْيَمِينِ ﴿٩٠﴾
a greeting of peace will welcome you by the ones on the right. (91)	فَسَلَٰمٌ لَّكَ مِنْ أَصْحَٰبِ ٱلْيَمِينِ ﴿٩١﴾
But if he happens to be one of those who denied the truth and went astray, (92)	وَأَمَّآ إِن كَانَ مِنَ ٱلْمُكَذِّبِينَ ٱلضَّآلِّينَ ﴿٩٢﴾
he will be welcomed with scalding water, (93)	فَنُزُلٌ مِّنْ حَمِيمٍ ﴿٩٣﴾
and the heat of a blazing fire. (94)	وَتَصْلِيَةُ جَحِيمٍ ﴿٩٤﴾
This is surely the indubitable truth. (95)	إِنَّ هَٰذَا لَهُوَ حَقُّ ٱلْيَقِينِ ﴿٩٥﴾
Extol, then, the glory of the name of your Lord, the Supreme. (96)	فَسَبِّحْ بِٱسْمِ رَبِّكَ ٱلْعَظِيمِ ﴿٩٦﴾

Unfinished Conditional

When that which is certain to happen will have come to pass no one will then deny its having come to pass, abasing [some], exalting [others]. When the earth is violently shaken and the mountains crumble away and scatter abroad into fine dust. (Verses 1–6)

This opening is clearly intended to add suspense to its presentation of this awesome but inevitable event. It employs a special style that clearly indicates this. Twice, it begins a conditional sentence, employing the word 'when', without finishing what the result or the outcome will be. It first says: "*When that which is certain to happen will have come to pass no one will then deny its having come to pass, abasing [some], exalting [others].*" (Verses 1–3) But it does not say what will take place when this inevitable event comes to pass. It simply says there can be no denying that it will happen. Without saying what comes next, the *sūrah* commences a new beginning with another conditional sentence: "*When the earth is violently shaken and the mountains crumble away and scatter abroad into fine dust.*" (Verses 4–6) Again, the *sūrah* does not tell us what happens after this exceedingly alarming event. Thus we are left with the impression that all this is merely an introduction to results that are so frightful that no words can adequately describe them.

This special style particularly suits the extremely frightening image the *sūrah* opens with. The *sūrah* denotes the event of resurrection by the term *al-wāqi'ah*, which primarily refers to something that falls hard. The very sound of the word gives the impression of a heavy object dropping from a high position and then settling where it cannot be moved or removed: "*No one will then deny its having come to pass.*" (Verse 2) As this heavy object falls, we expect it to produce some turmoil or shaking up. This expectation is fulfilled as the event is described as "*abasing [some] exalting [others].*" (Verse 3) It will certainly put down people who were looked up to during their lives on earth, and it will elevate others who were thought of as commanding little respect. Standards and values will be set straight in God's scale, after they have been out of balance in this world.

The frightening event then begins to take shape in the very structure of the earth, which people always think to be firm and stable. The event shows it being violently shaken, a reality that fits well with the sound of the fall. Firm and solid mountains are transformed into heaps of dust that the wind blows away: "*When the earth is violently shaken and the mountains crumble away and scatter abroad into fine dust.*" How ignorant and feeble-minded those people are who face this fearful prospect in full denial of the Day of Judgement, refusing to believe in God's oneness when it produces such an effect on the earth and its mountains.

Three Groups

As this strongly shaking scene concludes, we are then introduced to the effects of this inevitable event as some people are elevated while others are abased. This takes place when everyone faces their different fate:

> *You shall be divided into three classes: There are the people of the right side: what people are they? And the people of the left side: what people are they? And there are those to the fore, who shall be foremost.* (Verses 7–10)

Here, people are divided into three groups, unlike in most other Qur'ānic statements where they are shown to be in two groups. The *sūrah* first mentions the people of the right side, but does not give us any details about them. Instead, a question is asked about them, enhancing the feeling of expectation: "*There are the people of the right side: what people are they?*" (Verse 8) The same method is used for the opposite group: "*And the people of the left side: what people are they?*" (Verse 9) The third group is then mentioned, and these are the ones to the fore. They are described by the same quality of being ahead of all: "*there are those to the fore, who shall be foremost.*" (Verse 10) It is as if the *sūrah* says these are the ones, and this is enough. No further description is necessary, it would add nothing.

The *sūrah* then mentions their position with their Lord and describes in detail what blessings He has prepared for them. This is all described in a way that the addressees can understand, in light of their own knowledge and experience:

> *These will be brought nearest to God, in gardens of bliss. A good many of them are from earlier times and a few from later generations. On gold-encrusted couches they will recline facing each other. Immortal youths shall wait upon them with goblets, ewers, and cups filled with water from unsullied springs. From it they will not be dispersed, nor will they be in short supply. And with fruit of any kind they may choose, and with the meat of any fowl they may desire. There will be for them companions with large beautiful eyes like hidden pearls: a reward for what they used to do. There they will hear no idle talk, no sinful speech, only the saying, 'Peace! Peace'.* (Verses 11–26)

The *sūrah* begins this detailed account by mentioning the greatest aspect of their elevated position, the bliss of being close to their Lord: "*These will be brought nearest to God, in gardens of bliss.*" (Verses 11–12) The gardens of bliss, with all that they contain, is nothing compared to that topmost favour of being nearest to God.

The *sūrah* takes a short pause here to say who achieves this grade. Thus, we are told: "*A good many of them are from earlier times and a few from later generations.*" (Verses 13–14) They are, then, the chosen ones, constituting a limited number. Most of them belong to earlier generations, but a minority come from later ones. Views differ as to which are the earlier generations and which are the later ones. The first view suggests that the earlier generations refer to those who attained to a high degree of faith from among the communities that lived prior to the advent of Islam, while the few from the later generations refers to the ones who were the first to accept Islam and strive hard for its cause. The second view says that both the majority and the minority belong to the followers of the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him), with the ones of '*earlier times*' belonging to its first generations, and the others to later ones.

This second view is the one preferred by Ibn Kathīr, who cites in support quotations from al-Ḥasan and Ibn Sīrīn. Al-Ḥasan is reported to have said after reading these two verses: "Those to the fore are gone, but we pray to God to include us among the people of the right side." Then he explained the meaning of "*A good many of them are from earlier times,*" saying that these are "from the earlier generations of the Muslim community." Muḥammad ibn Sīrīn is reported to have said after reading these two verses: "Scholars used to say, or to hope, that they all belong to the Muslim community."

Now the *sūrah* begins to enumerate the types of luxuries they will enjoy in heaven. These are of course of the types they can imagine and visualize. Beyond these there are other luxuries and aspects of happiness and bliss, which they will recognize when they are ready to appreciate them in their future lives. These are things 'no eye has ever seen, no ear has ever heard of and no mind has ever imagined.'

"*On gold-encrusted couches they will recline facing each other.*" (Verses 15–16) They are comfortable, free of all worries and preoccupations,

reassured as to the continuity of their happiness, knowing that it will never end. Hence, they come together, in an atmosphere of mutual love. "*Immortal youths shall wait upon them.*" (Verse 17) These youths are unaffected by the passage of time; they retain their youthful looks. They go round carrying "*goblets, ewers, and cups filled with water from unsullied springs.*" (Verse 18) Their drink is made of pure wine that causes no intoxication. "*From it they will not be dispersed, nor will they be in short supply.*" (Verse 19) They are not turned away from it, nor will it ever be used up. Everything here is always plentiful; nothing is ever out of stock. "*And with fruit of any kind they may choose, and with the meat of any fowl they may desire.*" (Verses 20–21) Nothing is unavailable, while everything is given in the way those happy ones may desire. "*There will be for them companions with large beautiful eyes like hidden pearls.*" (Verses 22–23) Hidden pearls are those that are carefully treasured. No hand has ever put a needle through them, and no eye has ever cast a piercing look at them. A host of gentle connotations, both mental and physical, are implied in this description of these companions with their large beautiful eyes. All this is "*a reward for what they used to do.*" (Verse 24) It is a reward for what is done during that stage of life where action is required. In that life, nothing people do attains perfection, but here in this life, in heaven, the reward is absolutely perfect.

Moreover, they are greeted gently in a way that disdains all idle talk: "*There they will hear no idle talk, no sinful speech, only the saying, 'Peace! Peace'.*" (Verses 25–26) Their lives are peaceful; peace that spreads all around them. They are saluted by the angels with a greeting of peace, and they exchange the same greeting with one another, and an even better greeting of peace is extended to them from the Lord of Grace. It is all then a life of peace.

The Other Groups

The *sūrah* follows this account of the superior group with a similarly detailed one of the second group, to which a quick reference was made in the opening of the *sūrah*. The details of their situation in the life to come are now provided at the right point, beginning with a repetition

of the same question posed at the outset that gives a sense of seriousness and awe: "*As for those on the right, what people are they?*" (Verse 27).

This group are also enjoying a luxurious and happy life, but its description gives a sense of nomadic roughness. It answers all the needs of a nomadic people as they can best imagine a life of comfort and bliss. Thus, "*They will dwell amid thornless lote trees.*" (Verse 28). The lote tree is known for its thorns, but here it is thornless. "*And flower-clad acacias.*" (Verse 29) The acacia is a thorny type of leguminous tree well known in the Hijaz region of Arabia. However, the acacia trees in heaven are without thorns, have abundant fruit and are so situated as to enable real comfort. "*With extended shade, constantly flowing water.*" (Verses 30–31) These are all types of comfort dreamt of by the bedouin. "*Abundant fruits, unfailing, never out of reach.*" (Verses 32–33) These are left undetailed here, after having already outlined those types well-known by name to the bedouins. "*[Reclining on] couches raised high.*" (Verse 34) These couches are not described as gold-encrusted, nor as having fine embroidery. They are merely 'raised high'. Raising high contains a double meaning, physical and mental, both of which complement each other. As they are raised high, both meanings converge. In position, they are far removed from all types of impurity, kept clean. Mental elevation, on the other hand, is also far removed from all that stains. Therefore, the next aspect of their blessing describes the companions they have in heaven: "*We will have brought forth [their mates] in perfect creation.*" (Verse 35) These mates are either new ones, referring to the mates God assigns them from among the creatures that originally dwell in heaven, or they are their wives in this world, after they have been resurrected as virgins in the prime of youth, "*making them virgins.*" (Verse 36) They are "*full of love, of matching age.*" (Verse 37) And they are specially assigned and devoted "*for those on the right.*" (Verse 38)

These people on the right consist of "*A good many of them are from earlier times and a good many from later generations.*" (Verses 39–40) This means that they are greater in number than the first group of people to the fore, taking into account the two views we explained in reference to earlier and later generations.

The *sūrah* now speaks about the third group, the people on the left, to whom a general reference was made earlier on:

And those on the left, what people are they? They will dwell amid scorching wind and scalding water in the shadows of black smoke, neither cool nor refreshing. In times gone by, they overindulged in luxury and persisted in heinous sin, saying, 'What! When we have died and become mere dust and bones, are we to be raised up again? And our forefathers, too? Say: 'All people of the earliest and latest generations will indeed be gathered together at an appointed time on a specific day. Then, you who have gone astray and denied the truth will eat from the fruit of the Zaqqūm tree, filling your bellies with it, and will drink scalding water; yet you will drink it like insatiably thirsty camels drink.' Such will be their dwelling place on the Day of Judgement. (Verses 41–56)

While the people on the right enjoy extended shade and constantly flowing water, these on the left "*dwell amid scorching wind and scalding water in the shadows of black smoke, neither cool nor refreshing.*" (Verses 42–44) The whole atmosphere is of a scorching heat that penetrates and burns the skin. The water they have to drink is also scalding, giving no refreshment. They also have shade, but it is no more than the shadows of black smoke. It is a shade painted in irony, for such shade is devoid of coolness, inviting no rest, and giving no sensation other than that produced by suffocating heat. Such hardship is a fitting requital, for "*in times gone by, they overindulged in luxury.*" (Verse 45) The absence of comfort for those who are used to indulging and excessing in luxury is hard indeed. They also "*persisted in heinous sin*", associating partners with God. The Arabic word used here for sin is *ḥinth*, which means 'breach, violation'. It implies, thus, a reference to the pledge given by human nature to maintain faith in God's oneness and not to associate partners with Him. They are certainly in breach of that pledge. They used to say: "*What! When we have died and become mere dust and bones, are we to be raised up again? And our forefathers, too?*" (Verses 47–48) The *sūrah* clearly uses the past tense in these last two points, saying that they persisted in sin and denied the resurrection, thus treating this present life of the addressees as though it has already ended. In other words, this scene of suffering is made to appear as though it is presently occurring.

After all, this whole life is no more than a twinkling of the eye, whilst the life to come is ultimate and permanent.

The *sūrah* seizes this appropriate moment to answer their question, which they unfold in an exaggerated sense of incredulity: "*Say: All people of the earliest and latest generations will indeed be gathered together at an appointed time on a specific day.*" (Verses 49–50) The specific day is the one that has just been painted. It has been shown as though they are enduring it right now.

The *sūrah* resumes the description of the suffering that awaits those who deny the truth of God's oneness: "*Then, you who have gone astray and denied the truth will eat from the fruit of the Zaqqūm tree.*" (Verses 51–52) No one knows anything about the Zaqqūm tree other than the description God gives us in another *sūrah*, stating that "*its fruit is like devils' heads.*" (37: 65) Again no one has ever seen devils' heads, but the very phrase gives us a clear sense. Besides, the very name, Zaqqūm, implies a hard, rough surface with thorns that pierce hands and throats. This is in contrast to the thornless lote trees and flower-clad acacias that the people on the right enjoy. Although the fruit of the Zaqqūm tree looks like devils' heads, these people will eat it "*filling your bellies with it.*" (Verse 53) Hunger is overpowering. Hard and thorny food will inevitably require a drink to ease its swallowing and refresh the stomach. They, however, "*will drink scalding water.*" (Verse 54) Such a drink can never refresh or satisfy a thirsty person. Yet these people "*will drink it like insatiably thirsty camels drink.*" (Verse 55) These camels have a well known illness making them always thirsty. "*Such will be their dwelling place on the Day of Judgement.*" (Verse 56) A dwelling place is one that is supposed to give comfort and a sense of permanent settlement, but this dwelling for those on the left gives neither. This is how they are welcomed and this is the place assigned to them on the Day of Judgement, which they held in doubt, always rejecting what the Qur'ān told them about it. They also associated partners with God, disbelieving His warnings of what they may suffer on that day.

Thus ends the first part of the *sūrah* which has given us a detailed account of people's fates on the day when the inevitable takes place.

Stating the Case

The second part of the *sūrah* aims to establish the Islamic faith in full, but the issue of resurrection and future life receives the main focus. This provides an example of the Qur'ānic method of addressing human nature, utilizing indicators that encourage faith. It makes a gentle address to people's hearts as it presents great issues in an easy to understand way.

The Qur'ān presents phenomena that are very familiar to us and often repeated in our lives as great facts setting clear universal laws. It, thus, moulds this into a profound and comprehensive faith giving a complete concept of existence. It also uses such phenomena as a method for reflection, alerting minds and souls and awakening feelings. Thus people are able to clearly understand universal phenomena that they may often be oblivious to, despite the fact that they are always before their eyes. They can also be better aware of wonders that take place within their own selves.

The Qur'ān does not rely on a few individual miracles in its address to mankind. It does not require people to look for miracles and signs that are far removed from them, their lives and immediate natural phenomena. It does not lead them through sophisticated philosophical theories, or complex mental tasks, or through scientific experiments that no one can undertake in order to present them with the faith it advocates.

They themselves are of God's own making, and the natural phenomena in their immediate world are all His creation. There is a miracle in everything He makes. This Qur'ān is His own book. The One who takes them by the hand to such miracles within themselves and in the world around them is simply highlighting to them what is familiar and happening before their own eyes, yet they do not appreciate this because of long familiarity with them. He opens their eyes to these so that they can appreciate their great secret, the secret of His creative power and His absolute oneness. It is the secret of the eternal law that works within their own constitution and throughout the universe around them. It is the law that embodies the proofs of divine faith, alerting their nature to these proofs.

This is the line the *sūrah* follows in its second part. It shows them signs of God's limitless power in their own creation, in the plants they cultivate with their own hands, in the water they drink and the fire they light. These are among the simplest things they see all the time. It describes the approaching end of their lives on earth and the beginning of the next life in the world beyond. This is the inevitable moment everyone will have to face. At this moment, all are powerless. All creatures stand face to face before God's limitless power, as He executes His will. At this moment, all excuses are false. Only the truth prevails.

The method of the Qur'ān in addressing human nature is itself proof of its own source. It is the same source that gave rise to the universe. The same method of structure applies to the Qur'ān as it does to the universe, whereby elementary materials are used to produce gigantic and complex entities. Scientists think that the atom is the material from which the universe is built, and the cell is the unit used to build life. Yet infinitely small as they are, the atom and the cell are miracles in their own right. Here, the Qur'ān uses some simple scenes that have long been familiar to man to build the most profound religious faith and the broadest concept of existence. These scenes or observations are part of every human being's experience: newborns, plants, water, fire and death. Which human being, indeed which cave dweller has not witnessed the birth of a child, a new plant shoot, water falling, fire being lit, or a moment of death? The Qur'ān uses such scenes to present its faith, because it addresses every human being in every social environment. Yet these very simple scenes, as well as the reference to the positions of stars, are among the most important universal truths and divine secrets. In their profound simplicity, they address the nature of every human being; and in their essence they have been, and will always remain, the subject of study by the greatest scientists.

The positions of stars refer to the way the universe is designed. The origin of human life is the secret of all secrets, and the origin of plants is, like the origin of animal life, the mother of all miracles. Water is the essence of life, and fire is the miracle behind human civilization. This method of building the case for faith is not one man uses. When human beings address such issues, they do not pay attention to such elementary

materials. Should they even do so, they still do not present them in such a gentle and easy way. On the contrary, they employ an abstract, complex logic, that may only be grasped by the intellectual elite.

God's method is the one we see in this *sūrah*: using basic materials to build faith in total ease and simplicity. He does the same with the universe, building it with basic materials. The same method appears in both, and the Creator's stamp is clearly evident in both.

The Beginning and End

It is We who have created you: will you not believe? Consider the semen you discharge: do you create it, or are We the Creator? We have decreed that death shall be among you. Nothing can prevent Us from replacing you by others like yourselves or bringing you into being anew in a way unknown to you. You have learned how you have come into being in the first instance. Why, then, do you not reflect? (Verses 57–62)

This whole issue of faith is the same as the first instance of creation and the end, the giving of life and inevitable death. It is familiar, seen at all times. How come, then, that people do not believe that it is God who creates them? The weight of this truth on human nature is too heavy for anyone to challenge: "*It is We who have created you: will you not believe?*" (Verse 57)

"*Consider the semen you discharge: do you create it, or are We the Creator?*" (Verses 58–59) Man's role in the process of creation is no more than the man depositing his seed in the woman's body. Their respective roles are finished at that. From then on, the hand of God takes over. It works on its own, giving the embryo growth and development, building its skeleton and dressing it up, then breathing spirit into it. Right from the first moment, and at every subsequent moment, a miracle occurs that remains totally unknown to man. Indeed, man does not know how it occurs, let alone plays a role in it.

This measure of reflection on creation is understood by all people. It is enough to appreciate the miracle that takes place and reflect on its message. In fact, the story of this single cell, from the moment it is deposited until it becomes a full-fledged human being, surpasses all

imagination. The human mind would never have believed it, except for the fact that it occurs with all people as witnesses.

This single cell begins to multiply, and within a short period of time the number of cells reaches many millions, divided into groups with different characteristics. Each group is assigned its own task, to produce a particular aspect of the human being: one group produces bones, another muscles, a third nerves, and a different one produces the skin, while others produce nerves, etc. Another group of cells make an eye, another a tongue and a third an ear. A more specialized group will produce glands. Each group knows its position of work. The cells which make an eye will never miss its position so as to produce the eye, say, in the abdomen or the foot. Had these cells been transplanted so as to be based in the abdomen, they would make an eye there. However, each cell is guided to its proper place, and we never find a case where the eye's cells produce an eye in the abdomen, or the ear's cells produce an ear in the foot. All function properly to produce a human being, who is given the best shape and form, under God's care. Humans have no role in all this.

Such is the beginning; but the end is in no way less miraculous or amazing, even though it is so familiar a sight: "*We have decreed that death shall be among you. Nothing can prevent Us.*" (Verse 60) What is death, the inevitable end of every living thing? What is it? How does it occur? How come it overpowers all? It is nothing less than God's decree. Hence, no one can escape it. No one can spring ahead of it so as to miss it. It is a stage in the chain of existence that must be completed: "*Nothing can prevent Us from replacing you by others like yourselves,*" to be in charge of the earth after you have gone. God who has decreed death has also decreed life. He has decreed that people shall die, and that He will replace them with others like them, until the time span decreed for this stage of life comes to its end. Once it is over, then the second life begins: "*or bringing you into being anew in a way unknown to you.*" (Verse 61) This is in the realm that lies beyond the reach of our perception. It is a great realm about which humans know nothing other than what God is pleased to tell them. At that point, the journey comes to its end.

Such is how people are brought into being a second time: "*You have learned how you have come into being in the first instance. Why, then, do*

you not reflect?" (Verse 62) The two are not dissimilar in nature. There is nothing strange about it.

In such a simple approach, and with such ease the Qur'ān portrays the two great events of bringing humans into being. With such ease and simplicity, it makes human nature face the logic it knows well. It cannot dispute this logic because it is based on its own basic facts and on what people see in their own lives. It is an approach that is free of complication, abstraction and sophistication. It is the approach of God, the Creator of man and the universe who bestowed the Qur'ān from on high.

Plant, Water and Fire

Once more the Qur'ān, in perfect ease and simplicity, puts before people something which is well known to them and which they repeatedly see. It shows how God's hand works to bring it about, showing them the miracle they overlook when it is always happening in front of their very own eyes:

> *Consider the seeds you sow in the ground: is it you who makes them grow, or We? Were it Our will, We could turn it into chaff and leave you to wail, 'We are burdened with debt; we have been deprived.'* (Verses 63–67)

What role do humans play in plant growth that culminates in fruition? They certainly till the earth and plant the seeds made by God, but that is about it. Their role is then finished, leaving the matter entirely to God's hand. It is He who completes this miraculous work.

The seed or the grain begins its journey to reproduce its kind, moving on like one who knows the way, stage after stage, one who will never commit the like of a human error, who will never change course or deviate from the path. It is the hand of God that guides it throughout this remarkable journey. No one could have ever believed this miracle, and no mind could have imagined it; yet it happens all the time and everyone of us sees it in one form or another. How else could anyone have believed that a wheat grain incorporates a stalk and leaves, as well

as an ear holding together a large number of grains? Who could have imagined that a date stone can produce such a large palm tree, with all that it contains?

What mind could have gone so far as to imagine this amazing wonder, had it not been for the fact that it happens before our very eyes? Can any person claim any role in producing this miracle other than planting the seeds and grains which are of God's own making?

Yet people say: "We have planted" when they have not gone beyond laying the seeds. As for the miracle that shoots out and grows, it is all of God's making. Had He willed, it would not have started its journey, or would not have completed it. Had He willed, He would have turned it into chaff even before it yielded its crop. It is by God's will that the seed and grain progress along the way to the end of their respective journeys. Had any of this not taken place, people would say: "*We are burdened with debt; we have been deprived.*" (Verses 66–67) It is God who, in His grace, grants them the fruits of their plants, allowing the plant to complete its cycle of life, which is similar to that which a human seed goes through from the moment it is discharged. Both are pictures of life as God makes it.

Such is the first time life comes into being. Why should a second time be thought strange?

> *Consider the water you drink: is it you who brings it down from the clouds, or We? Were it Our will, We could make it salty and bitter. Why, then, do you not give thanks?* (Verses 68–70)

Water is the source of life, its most essential component. God has so willed that without water no life is possible. What role does man play with water? Is it anything beyond the fact that he drinks it? The One who made water out of the elements that produce it, and who caused it to fall from the clouds bearing it, is none other than God – limitless is He in His glory. It is He who has made water sweet. Had He willed otherwise, He could have made it '*salty and bitter*', undrinkable, and unable to produce life. Is it not right then that they should express their gratitude to God for having willed it so?

Those who were the first to be addressed by the Qur'ān realized that the very water that falls from the clouds was essential for their lives. They were always delighted to see it falling. Indeed, talking about it gave them pleasure; they even sang its praises in their poetry. Human progress and civilization has in no way reduced the importance of water; on the contrary, it has almost doubled. Scientists who try to understand how water first came about realize its importance to a higher degree. Thus we see that water is the focus of attention for a bedouin in the desert as well as for a scientist in his laboratory.

> *Consider the fire you kindle: is it you who grows its tree, or We? We made it a reminder for man, and a comfort for desert travellers* (Verses 71–73)

The discovery of fire was a greatly important event in mankind's life. It was perhaps its most important event as it signalled the beginning of civilization. Fire, however, has become so familiar that it stirs no interest. Man certainly kindles fire, but who grows the tree that becomes its fuel? The *sūrah* has already mentioned plants, and trees are a type of plant. Yet another point is mentioned by the reference to '*its tree*' The Arabs used to ignite fire by rubbing a branch of one tree against another from a different tree, in the way still used in some primitive social environments. This, thus makes this description a close parallel of their own experience. As for the miracle of fire and its secret which scientists study, these are areas that deserve more attention. The mention of fire here is also used as a reminder of the fire of hell: "*We made it a reminder for man,*" reminding man of the life to come. God has also made fire "*a comfort for desert travellers.*" (Verse 73) This last point was particularly relevant to the Arabs addressed by the Qur'ān, as it referred to their own life experience.

The *sūrah* now points to the ultimate truth that all these facts lead to: God's Lordship of the universe and His ultimate power that now manifests itself, in all its glory, to human nature. It instructs the Prophet to recognize this truth, give it its due, and bring it to the forefront so that it exercises its profound influence on people's hearts: "*Extol, then, the glory of the name of your Lord, the Supreme.*" (Verse 74)

A Great Oath

Now the *sūrah* directs its address to those who denied the truth of the Qur'ān in another way, providing a relationship between it and the universe in a great oath by God, the Lord of all the worlds:

> *I do swear by the positions of the stars – a mighty oath, if you but knew it! – that this is indeed a most honourable Qur'ān, in a well-guarded record that only the purified can touch: a revelation from the Lord of all the worlds.* (Verses 75–80)

Those addressed by the Qur'ān at the time of its revelation knew no more about the positions of the stars than what they could see with the naked eye. Therefore, the *sūrah* tells them that the oath already made was a mighty one, even though they did not know it at the time. Today, we appreciate the greatness of this oath far more than they did, but we too know only very little about the greatness of the positions of the stars. The little we have discovered with our seemingly advanced observatories and allegedly powerful telescopes tells us that one of the countless clusters in open space, the one that constitutes the galaxy that contains our solar system, includes one billion stars.[1]

> Astronomers say that some of these stars and planets, which number many billions, can be seen with the naked eye, while others can only be seen with powerful telescopes. Others still can only be sensed by such very powerful telescopes. All these run in their respective orbits in space. The possibility of a magnetic field of one of these stars coming close to another, or of a planet crashing into another, is as remote as that of a boat in the Mediterranean crashing into one travelling in the Indian Ocean, when both are travelling in the same direction at the same speed. The chances of such a crash ever taking place are so remote that it is certainly impossible.[2]

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1. In its shorter version, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* mentions that "The Milky Way system contains hundreds of billions of stars and large amounts of interstellar gas and dust." It is well known that the earth's solar system is part of the Milky Way galaxy. The author's mention that it includes one billion stars was perhaps the estimate at the time he wrote. – Editor's note.
2. Nawfal, A.R., *Allah wal-'Ilm al-Ḥadīth*, Cairo, (n.d.), p. 33.

Every star in its position, which is so distant from its sister stars, is placed there in accordance with God's wisdom and careful measure. Each interacts with other stars and planets to produce a measured equilibrium between all these entities floating in space. All this is part of the greatness of the positions of the stars. It goes far beyond the knowledge of those who were the first to be addressed by the Qur'ān. At the same time, it is immeasurably less than the total truth of the greatness of stars and their positions.

"*I do swear by the positions of the stars – a mighty oath, if you but knew it!*" (Verses 75–76) These verses make an oath which is correctly rendered in the translation here. However, the *sūrah* employs a special mode of expression, often used in the Qur'ān which would say, if literally translated, "I do not swear by..." This stylistic feature mentions an oath, then appears to turn away from it. It is as if God is saying: "I do not need to make this oath by..." Yet this does not convey exactly the same meaning. The Arabic original is far more powerful in its deliverance of what is intended. Hence, the emphasis on the oath in the way it is rendered in English. The point is that this great truth does not need an oath to establish it, as it is already clear and well confirmed: "*This is indeed a most honourable Qur'ān, in a well-guarded record that only the purified can touch: a revelation from the Lord of all the worlds.*" (Verses 77–80)

The Qur'ān is indeed a most honourable discourse. It is unlike anything the unbelievers allege about it, claiming that it is the work of a monk or a madman or that it is fabricated, or a host of ancient legends, or that it is delivered by devils, or whatever. It is most honourable by its source, by itself and by the message and teachings it imparts.

Further description of the Qur'ān is added in the next two verses, the second of which provides an explanation of the first: "*In a well-guarded record that only the purified can touch.*" (Verses 78–79) The unbelievers alleged that the Qur'ān was given to the Prophet by devils. This verse refutes this. No devil can touch this record, which is well-guarded, kept safe under God's care. It is purified by angels that bring it down to the Prophet. This is the better explanation of the verse that says that only the purified can touch the Qur'ān. The negation here is a statement, not a command. In this life on earth anyone can handle the Qur'ān: someone who is purified or someone who is contaminated, a believer or

an unbeliever. To take the negation as applying to the book containing the Qur'ān would be erroneous. It can only be true when we take it as refuting the unbelievers' allegations. The divine record containing the Qur'ān in heaven is untouchable by anyone other than purified angels. This is further confirmed by the statement that follows, confirming that the Qur'ān is "*a revelation from the Lord of all the worlds.*" (Verse 80)

Two *ḥadīth* reports state a different meaning, implying that only a person who has purified himself by ablution can touch the Qur'ān. Ibn Kathīr, however, makes clear that neither of these reports has been authentically transmitted.

At the Moment of Death

The final passage in the *sūrah* speaks of the moment of death, which sends a shudder of fear into everyone. This is the moment when all argument stops, when a person stands at the end of one road and the beginning of another. It is a point of no return:

> *Would you look on this discourse with disdain? Do you make it your livelihood that you persistently deny it? When the soul [of a dying person] comes up to the throat while you are helplessly looking on We are closer to him than you, although you do not see Us. Why, if you think you are not to be judged, can you not restore that [ebbing life], if what you claim is true?* (Verses 81–87)

Are you in doubt about what you are told concerning a second life, denying the truth of the Qur'ān and what it tells you about the Day of Judgement, or the principles of faith it lays down for you? "*Do you make it your livelihood that you persistently deny it?*" (Verse 82) Your denial is all that you earn and save in this life for your second life. How miserable a livelihood! What will you do when your soul is in your throat, standing on a road that leads you to the unknown?

The *sūrah* paints this situation in an inspiring way, drawing all its aspects in quick touches: "*When the soul [of a dying person] comes up to the throat while you are helplessly looking on We are closer to him than you, although you do not see Us.*" (Verses 83–85) We almost hear a rattling

sound in the throat, see the features decline and sense the distress: "*When the soul [of a dying person] comes up to the throat.*" We almost see the despair on the faces of those attending the dying person: "*while you are helplessly looking on.*"

At this point, when the soul is no longer concerned with anything in this world; when it has put the whole earthly world behind it; when it is about to see a world totally unknown and for which it has no provisions other than its deeds in this life; when it sees a new world and cannot say anything about it; when it has separated from all around it who only see a dying body but who stand helpless, then human power and knowledge are at their end. At this point, people realize that they are absolutely helpless: they see nothing, know nothing and can do nothing. All power and knowledge belong to God alone, with no one able to cast any doubt about this truth: "*We are closer to him than you, although you do not see Us.*" (Verse 85)

At this point God's majesty is clearly felt, and people experience a sense of awe resulting from His presence. He is no doubt present at all times, but the Qur'ānic statement reawakens the feeling of this truth which people often overlook. Hence, the scene of death is overshadowed by feelings of God's majesty and awe, in addition to people's own helplessness.

The *sūrah* now puts forward a challenge that ends all argument: "*Why, if you think you are not to be judged, can you not restore that [ebbing life], if what you claim is true?*" (Verses 86–87) If it is true that there will be no reckoning of deeds and no requital for them and you are free, with no accounting to make, then try, if you can, to restore this soul that has come up to the throat and put it back in place. Try, if you can, to prevent its march towards that reckoning while you helplessly look on.

Thus all excuses, arguments and disputes end. This truth is felt to be so weighty that no man can stand up to it, except through stubborn and baseless denial.

The Final Destination

The *sūrah* now explains the fate of the soul that has turned its back on this world to begin its new and permanent life:

> *If that dying person is one of those who are drawn close to God, he will have repose, fulfilment and a garden of bliss. If he is one of those on the right, a greeting of peace will welcome you by the ones on the right. But if he happens to be one of those who denied the truth and went astray, he will be welcomed with scalding water, and the heat of a blazing fire.* (Verses 88–94)

In the early part of the *sūrah* we saw images of the blessings granted to those who are close to God. The soul of such a person will now see what awaits it: '*repose, fulfilment and a garden of bliss.*' The very sound of these words overflows with comfort, ease and happiness.

"*If he is one of those on the right.*" This person is now directly addressed with a greeting sent to him by his brethren who are on the right. It is a gentle and delightful greeting, giving him reassurance. He begins to look forward to his forthcoming life with the people on the right.

"*But if he happens to be one of those who denied the truth and went astray, he will be welcomed with scalding water, and the heat of a blazing fire.*" (Verses 92–94) How miserable a welcome! How terrible is the suffering of scalding water and blazing fire! It all appears before such a person and he knows that he will have to experience it.

Now that this climax has been reached, the conclusion is profound and serious in its tone: "*This is surely the indubitable truth. Extol, then, the glory of the name of your Lord, the Supreme.*" (Verses 95–96) The great weight assigned to this absolute truth in God's scales thus combines with the inevitable event mentioned at the beginning of the *sūrah*. The final feeling reflects the effect of this firm belief with glorification of God, the Supreme.

SŪRAH 57

Al-Ḥadīd

(Iron)

Prologue

This *sūrah,* in its totality, is an address to the Muslim community, calling upon it to fulfil faith within its own society. The community should become an embodiment of the truth of faith, enabling hearts to become so dedicated that they are ready to sacrifice all, life and property, feelings and emotions, for it. With this truth, human souls are elevated to a divine level while they still live on earth. Thus, their standards are those that God has established, and their values are those that are given weight on God's scales. This truth enables hearts to feel the presence of God, to humble themselves when He is mentioned and to discard everything that may hinder them from turning to Him in complete dedication.

On the basis of this truth of faith, the *sūrah* calls upon the Muslim community to sacrifice life and property for God's cause: "*Believe in God and His Messenger, and give [in charity] of that of which He has made you trustees. Those of you who believe and give [in charity] will have a great reward. Why should you not believe in God when the Messenger calls upon you to believe in your Lord, and He has already taken a pledge from you, if you are true believers? It is He who bestows from on high clear revelations to His servant, to lead you out of the deep darkness into light. God is indeed most compassionate to you, ever merciful. Why should you not spend freely*

in the cause of God, seeing that God's alone is the heritage of the heavens and the earth? Those of you who gave and fought [for God's cause] before the victory are not like others: they are higher in rank than those who gave and fought afterwards, although God has promised the ultimate good to all of them. God is well aware of all that you do." (Verses 7–10)

The Muslim community is also called upon to humble themselves at the remembrance of God and the truth He has bestowed. This so that their sacrifices are the result of this humble acceptance of the truth of faith: "*Is it not time for believers that their hearts should feel humble at the remembrance of God and the truth that has been bestowed from on high, and not to be like those who were granted revelations before them and whose hearts have hardened with the passing of time? Many of these are now transgressors!*" (Verse 16)

The *sūrah* puts the values of this world against those of the next world in the balance of the truth. It invites the Muslim community to choose the clearly preponderant scale and to uphold the true value: "*Know that the life of this world is but a play, a passing delight, a beautiful show, a cause of boasting among you and a quest for more riches and children. It is like the rain that causes the plants to grow, and thus gives delight to the sowers. Then it withers, and you can see it turn yellow, and in the end it crumbles into dust. In the life to come there is terrible suffering, as well as God's forgiveness and His goodly acceptance. The life of this world is no more than an illusory pleasure. Vie with one another in seeking to attain your Lord's forgiveness, and a paradise as vast as the heavens and the earth, prepared for those who believe in God and His messengers. Such is God's bounty which He grants to whomever He pleases. God's bounty is great indeed.*" (Verses 20–21)

It is clear from the *sūrah*'s drift that it addresses a real situation within the Muslim community, one that existed at the time of its revelation. This situation existed in Madīnah during the period stretching from the fourth year after the Prophet's immigration up to the time after Makkah had fallen to Islam. In Madīnah at that time were the early Muslims, the Muhājirīn who had migrated from Makkah, and the Anṣār who had welcomed them into their city. Both groups set the highest example ever in human history in translating the truth of faith into practical reality. They hastened to sacrifice life and property in total dedication to their

cause, undeterred by any worldly consideration, personal desire or temptation. Yet besides these there was within the Muslim community a second group that did not attain the same high level of faith, particularly after Makkah had fallen to Islam. By then Islam was clearly triumphant and people flocked to it in large groups. Many of these new converts did not yet fully understand the basic truth of faith, nor did they dedicate their lives to it as the first group did.

People belonging to this second group found it difficult to make sacrifices of self and property for God's cause. Such duties seemed too hard, while the comforts of this worldly life were too appealing and impossible to resist. It is to those in particular that the *sūrah* makes its inspiring address so that their souls eradicate such temptations and elevate them to the level required by the great truth of faith.

There was also in Madīnah at this time a third group consisting of hypocrites. These were unseparated from the body of the Muslim community, especially so once Islam's power became clearly apparent. These hypocrites were forced to hide themselves, pretending to be Muslims when deep in their hearts there was doubt. They also looked for opportunities to create problems for the Muslim community and contributed to any cause of strife. The *sūrah* describes their situation when they are called out and separated from the Muslim community: "*On the day when you see all believers, men and women, with their light spreading rapidly before them and to their right, [they will be told], 'The good news for you today is that you shall for ever abide in gardens through which running waters flow. This is indeed the supreme triumph.' On that day the hypocrites, men and women, will say to the believers, 'Wait for us! Let us have a ray of your light!' They will be told: 'Turn back and seek some other light.' A wall with a gate will be raised between them: within it will be mercy, and outside will be suffering. [Those without] will call out to those [within], 'Were we not with you?' They will reply, 'Yes, but you allowed yourselves to be led into temptation, you wavered, you doubted, and you were deceived by false hopes until God's command came to pass, and indeed you let your deceptive thoughts about God delude you. Today no ransom will be accepted from you or from the unbelievers. The fire shall be your home: it is where you belong; and how evil a destination!*" (Verses 12–15)

There were, in addition, a number of Jews and Christians who still lived in Arabia. The *sūrah* refers to their situation and some of their past and present attitudes. We have already quoted the verse that requires the believers "*not to be like those who were granted revelations before them and whose hearts have hardened with the passing of time.*" (Verse 16) This reference was most probably to the Jews. A reference to the Christians is given towards the end of the *sūrah*: "*We sent other messengers to follow in their footsteps. After these We sent Jesus, son of Mary. We gave him the Gospel and put compassion and mercy in the hearts of those who truly follow him. As for monastic asceticism, We did not enjoin it upon them. They invented it themselves out of a desire for God's goodly acceptance. Even so, they did not observe it as it should properly be observed. So We gave those of them who truly believed their due reward, but many of them were transgressors.*" (Verse 27)

In establishing the great truth of faith in people's hearts the *sūrah* follows an inspiring course, akin to Makkan *sūrahs* in aligning a host of influences that captivate hearts and feelings. Its opening in particular strikes a combination of highly inspiring notes, presenting a number of God's attributes that emphasize the Islamic concept of Him. This includes a subtle but captivating invitation to dedicate oneself totally to God as a result of understanding the true meaning of His oneness, His total control of the universe, the fact that everything eventually returns to Him, His knowledge of what people harbour in their hearts and the fact that all beings submit to Him and extol His glory: "*Everything in the heavens and earth extols God's limitless glory. He is the Almighty, the Wise. His is the dominion over the heavens and the earth. He grants life and causes death; and He has power over all things. He is the First and the Last, the Outer and the Inner. He has full knowledge of all things. It is He who created the heavens and the earth in six days and established Himself on the throne. He knows all that goes into the earth and all that comes out of it; all that descends from the skies and all that ascends to them. He is with you wherever you may be; and God sees all that you do. His is the dominion over the heavens and the earth. Everything goes back to God. He causes the night to pass into the day, and the day to pass into the night; and He has full knowledge of what is in people's hearts.*" (Verses 1–6)

This very opening is enough to strongly shake people's hearts, inspiring them with awe and strengthening their desire to dedicate themselves to God. They should turn to God after discarding all that constitutes a hindrance to sacrifice for His cause. The rest of the *sūrah*, however, includes a number of elements that reaffirm this call to sacrifice, such as the bright picture it paints of believing men and women, who are seen "*with their light spreading rapidly before them and to their right.*" (Verse 12) Another image shows this life and its value as trifling, compared with those of the life to come.

The *sūrah* also portrays how God's will is in complete control of the whole world: "*No incident can take place, either on earth or in yourselves, unless it be recorded in a decree before We bring it into being – that is easy for God – so you need not grieve for what you miss or be overjoyed at what you gain. God does not love those who are arrogant and boastful; [nor] those who are niggardly and bid others to be niggardly. Those who turn away should remember that God alone is self-sufficient, worthy of praise.*" (Verses 22–24) These verses give our hearts and souls all the necessary reassurance, no matter what befalls us of good or evil as we proceed along the way seeking His acceptance. We will neither despair nor be mad with joy when either eventuality happens to us; nor will we attribute whatever happens to any cause, event or circumstance. All takes place by God's will, in accordance with what He has planned. All ultimately return to Him.

The *sūrah* may be divided into two closely interrelated parts, each of which we will now deal with separately.

I

Who Gives God a Loan?

Al-Ḥadīd (Iron)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

Everything in the heavens and earth extols God's limitless glory. He is the Almighty, the Wise. (1)

سَبَّحَ لِلَّهِ مَا فِى ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ ۖ وَهُوَ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلْحَكِيمُ ﴿١﴾

His is the dominion over the heavens and the earth. He grants life and causes death; and He has power over all things. (2)

لَهُۥ مُلْكُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ ۖ يُحْىِۦ وَيُمِيتُ ۖ وَهُوَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَىْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ﴿٢﴾

He is the First and the Last, the Outer and the Inner. He has full knowledge of all things. (3)

هُوَ ٱلْأَوَّلُ وَٱلْءَاخِرُ وَٱلظَّٰهِرُ وَٱلْبَاطِنُ ۖ وَهُوَ بِكُلِّ شَىْءٍ عَلِيمٌ ﴿٣﴾

It is He who created the heavens and the earth in six days and established Himself on the throne. He knows all that goes into the earth and all that comes out of it; all that descends

هُوَ ٱلَّذِى خَلَقَ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضَ فِى سِتَّةِ أَيَّامٍ ثُمَّ ٱسْتَوَىٰ عَلَى ٱلْعَرْشِ ۚ يَعْلَمُ مَا يَلِجُ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ وَمَا يَخْرُجُ مِنْهَا وَمَا يَنزِلُ

from the skies and all that ascends to them. He is with you wherever you may be; and God sees all that you do. (4)

مِنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ وَمَا يَعۡرُجُ فِيهَاۖ وَهُوَ مَعَكُمۡ أَيۡنَ مَا كُنتُمۡۚ وَٱللَّهُ بِمَا تَعۡمَلُونَ بَصِيرٞ ٤

His is the dominion over the heavens and the earth. Everything goes back to God. (5)

لَّهُۥ مُلۡكُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضِۚ وَإِلَى ٱللَّهِ تُرۡجَعُ ٱلۡأُمُورُ ٥

He causes the night to pass into the day, and the day to pass into the night; and He has full knowledge of what is in people's hearts. (6)

يُولِجُ ٱلَّيۡلَ فِي ٱلنَّهَارِ وَيُولِجُ ٱلنَّهَارَ فِي ٱلَّيۡلِۚ وَهُوَ عَلِيمُۢ بِذَاتِ ٱلصُّدُورِ ٦

Believe in God and His Messenger, and give [in charity] of that of which He has made you trustees. Those of you who believe and give [in charity] will have a great reward. (7)

ءَامِنُواْ بِٱللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِۦ وَأَنفِقُواْ مِمَّا جَعَلَكُم مُّسۡتَخۡلَفِينَ فِيهِۖ فَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ مِنكُمۡ وَأَنفَقُواْ لَهُمۡ أَجۡرٞ كَبِيرٞ ٧

Why should you not believe in God when the Messenger calls upon you to believe in your Lord, and He has already taken a pledge from you, if you are true believers? (8)

وَمَا لَكُمۡ لَا تُؤۡمِنُونَ بِٱللَّهِ وَٱلرَّسُولُ يَدۡعُوكُمۡ لِتُؤۡمِنُواْ بِرَبِّكُمۡ وَقَدۡ أَخَذَ مِيثَٰقَكُمۡ إِن كُنتُم مُّؤۡمِنِينَ ٨

It is He who bestows from on high clear revelations to His servant, to lead you out of the deep darkness into light. God is indeed most compassionate to you, ever merciful. (9)

هُوَ ٱلَّذِي يُنَزِّلُ عَلَىٰ عَبۡدِهِۦٓ ءَايَٰتِۭ بَيِّنَٰتٖ لِّيُخۡرِجَكُم مِّنَ ٱلظُّلُمَٰتِ إِلَى ٱلنُّورِۚ وَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ بِكُمۡ لَرَءُوفٞ رَّحِيمٞ ٩

Why should you not spend freely in the cause of God, seeing that God's alone is the heritage of the heavens and the earth? Those of you who gave and fought [for God's cause] before the victory are not like others: they are higher in rank than those who gave and fought afterwards, although God has promised the ultimate good to all of them. God is well aware of all that you do. (10)

وَمَا لَكُمْ أَلَّا تُنفِقُوا فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ وَلِلَّهِ
مِيرَاثُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ ۚ لَا يَسْتَوِي
مِنكُم مَّنْ أَنفَقَ مِن قَبْلِ الْفَتْحِ وَقَاتَلَ ۚ
أُولَٰئِكَ أَعْظَمُ دَرَجَةً مِّنَ الَّذِينَ أَنفَقُوا
مِن بَعْدُ وَقَاتَلُوا ۚ وَكُلًّا وَعَدَ اللَّهُ
الْحُسْنَىٰ ۚ وَاللَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ خَبِيرٌ ﴿١٠﴾

Who will offer God a generous loan, which He will repay in multiples and will generously reward him? (11)

مَّن ذَا الَّذِي يُقْرِضُ اللَّهَ قَرْضًا حَسَنًا
فَيُضَاعِفَهُ لَهُ وَلَهُ أَجْرٌ كَرِيمٌ ﴿١١﴾

On the day when you see all believers, men and women, with their light spreading rapidly before them and to their right, [they will be told], 'The good news for you today is that you shall for ever abide in gardens through which running waters flow. This is indeed the supreme triumph.' (12)

يَوْمَ تَرَى الْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتِ يَسْعَىٰ
نُورُهُم بَيْنَ أَيْدِيهِمْ وَبِأَيْمَانِهِم بُشْرَاكُمُ الْيَوْمَ
جَنَّاتٌ تَجْرِي مِن تَحْتِهَا الْأَنْهَارُ خَالِدِينَ فِيهَا ۚ
ذَٰلِكَ هُوَ الْفَوْزُ الْعَظِيمُ ﴿١٢﴾

On that day the hypocrites, men and women, will say to the believers, 'Wait for us! Let us have a ray of your light!' They will be told: 'Turn back and seek some other light.' A wall with a gate will be raised between them: within it will be mercy, and outside will be suffering. (13)

يَوْمَ يَقُولُ الْمُنَافِقُونَ وَالْمُنَافِقَاتُ لِلَّذِينَ
آمَنُوا انظُرُونَا نَقْتَبِسْ مِن نُّورِكُمْ قِيلَ
ارْجِعُوا وَرَاءَكُمْ فَالْتَمِسُوا نُورًا فَضُرِبَ
بَيْنَهُم بِسُورٍ لَّهُ بَابٌ بَاطِنُهُ فِيهِ الرَّحْمَةُ
وَظَاهِرُهُ مِن قِبَلِهِ الْعَذَابُ ﴿١٣﴾

[Those without] will call out to those [within], 'Were we not with you?' They will reply, 'Yes, but you allowed yourselves to be led into temptation, you wavered, you doubted, and you were deceived by false hopes until God's command came to pass, and indeed you let your deceptive thoughts about God delude you. (14)

يُنَادُونَهُمْ أَلَمْ نَكُن مَّعَكُمْ ۖ قَالُوا بَلَىٰ وَلَٰكِنَّكُمْ فَتَنتُمْ أَنفُسَكُمْ وَتَرَبَّصْتُمْ وَارْتَبْتُمْ وَغَرَّتْكُمُ الْأَمَانِيُّ حَتَّىٰ جَاءَ أَمْرُ اللَّهِ وَغَرَّكُم بِاللَّهِ الْغَرُورُ ﴿١٤﴾

Today no ransom will be accepted from you or from the unbelievers. The fire shall be your home: it is where you belong; and how evil a destination!' (15)

فَالْيَوْمَ لَا يُؤْخَذُ مِنكُمْ فِدْيَةٌ وَلَا مِنَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا ۚ مَأْوَاكُمُ النَّارُ ۖ هِيَ مَوْلَاكُمْ ۖ وَبِئْسَ الْمَصِيرُ ﴿١٥﴾

All Glorify God

Everything in the heavens and earth extols God's limitless glory. He is the Almighty, the Wise. His is the dominion over the heavens and the earth. He grants life and causes death; and He has power over all things. He is the First and the Last, the Outer and the Inner. He has full knowledge of all things. It is He who created the heavens and the earth in six days and established Himself on the throne. He knows all that goes into the earth and all that comes out of it; all that descends from the skies and all that ascends to them. He is with you wherever you may be; and God sees all that you do. His is the dominion over the heavens and the earth. Everything goes back to God. He causes the night to pass into the day, and the day to pass into the night; and He has full knowledge of what is in every heart. (Verses 1–6)

This opening brings together a number of the attributes of Godhead as they manifest themselves in action. We see clearly that it is God who originates all, encompasses all, controls all and knows all. We see the hand of God as it works throughout the heavens and earth, tackles

innermost feelings, brings out deeply-buried secrets and looks from above on the universe and all who abide there. This powerful opening strongly shakes our hearts as it takes us on a round through the universe where we find, see and hear none other than God. We realize that we cannot escape His will, hide from His knowledge, seek refuge with, or appeal to anyone other than Him.

"*Everything in the heavens and earth extols God's limitless glory. He is the Almighty, the Wise.*" (Verse 1) Thus the *sūrah* begins and the entire universe echoes God's glorifications. Everything in the universe joins in so that every open heart, no longer shielded by preoccupations with the transitory life of this world, hears this glorification. We do not need to dig for any further meaning to the text other than the apparent significance of its words. We do not know anything about the nature of the universe that is truer and more accurate than what God tells us. Therefore, when God says that everything in the universe '*extols God's limitless glory*,' then this is exactly what this sentence means. No other words highlight this meaning better or closer. We may understand from this that everything in the heavens and earth has a soul that turns to God and glorifies Him. This is the verse's closest meaning, confirmed by a number of authentic *aḥādīth*. It is also the experience of some people, who at moments when their hearts and souls were at a high point of clarity, related to the truth inherent in everything and who could see beyond apparent shapes and forms.

In the Qur'ān, we read about the Prophet David: "*We said: You mountains, sing with him God's praises! And likewise you birds!*" (34: 10) And that is what happened: the mountains and the birds sang God's praises with David who himself had a pleasant and melodious voice. In his anthology of authentic *aḥādīth*, Muslim relates, on the authority of Jābir ibn Samurah: "The Prophet said: 'There is in Makkah a rock that used to greet me during the early days of my mission. I can identify it now'." 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib reports: "I was with the Prophet in Makkah when we went out in a certain direction. Every tree or mountain he faced said to him: 'Peace be to you, Messenger of God'." [Related by al-Tirmidhī.] Al-Bukhārī relates on the authority of Mālik ibn Anas: "The Prophet used to give his sermons leaning on the branch of a tree. When the pulpit was made for him to stand on and he stood there delivering

his sermon, the branch yearned like a she-camel. The Prophet went down and rubbed it with his hand and it stopped."

There are many Qur'ānic verses that clearly express this universal fact, such as: "*Are you not aware that it is God whose limitless glory all creatures that are in the heavens and earth extol, even the birds as they spread out their wings? Each of them knows how to pray to Him and to glorify Him.*" (24: 41) "*Are you not aware that to God bow down in worship all those who are in the heavens and on earth, the sun, the moon, the stars, the mountains, the trees and the beasts, and a great number of human beings?*" (22: 18) "*Indeed every single thing extols His glory and praise, but you cannot understand their praises.*" (17: 44) There is no need to try to explain these clear texts in a way that suits our own preconceptions of the nature of things when these are not based on the Qur'ān. Whatever ideas or thoughts we entertain about the universe should rely, first and foremost, on what is stated by God, the Creator and Originator of the universe, who bestowed the Qur'ān from on high.

"*He is the Almighty, the Wise.*" (Verse 1) His glorification by everything in the heavens and earth is a result of His surpassing power and wisdom. He is the One who has power over everything and who controls everything according to His flawless wisdom.

Absolute Dominion

We hardly catch our breath after this first verse has portrayed this great universal festival of God's glorification. The *sūrah* immediately takes us on another round in the universe: "*His is the dominion over the heavens and the earth. He grants life and causes death; and He has power over all things.*" (Verse 2) We have learnt that everything in the heavens and earth extols God's glory, as He is the sole owner of the universe who has no partner in His dominion. It is, thus, a case of glorifying the Owner by His property. It is He who creates life and death, granting life to every living thing and then determining its death. Nothing happens other than what He wills.

Life continues to be a secret in its nature and source. No one can tell where it came from or how. Indeed, no one knows what life truly is. The Qur'ān says that it is God who grants life to every living entity. No

one can deny this or prove anything contrary to it. Likewise, death is a deeply hidden secret whose nature is unknown to all. No one can cause it because none can take life away other than the One who granted it in the first place. Both life and death are aspects of His absolute dominion over the heavens and the earth.

"*He has power over all things.*" (Verse 2) His power is absolute, unrestricted by anything. God's will operates without any restriction whatsoever. Any limitation, of any type, form or colour, our minds try to apply to God's will, according to our own logic, is false as it is conceived by man's finite mind. The fact that God's will determines and operates the laws that operate in the universe is part of the overall picture of His free, unrestricted will. The choice is made without restriction, and the operation of these laws does not impose any limitation on God's will to make it operate within these laws. God's choice remains free and unrestricted.

The Qur'ān lays much emphasis on this fact, reiterating it on every occasion in a way that accentuates that God's will is absolutely free, unrestricted even by the results of its own actions. Thus, this fact remains clear, uncoloured by any alien conception. For example, God has promised the people of heaven that they will abide there forever, and the same promise is given to the people of hell. This promise is issued by His will, but His will is kept free beyond the very promise He has chosen to give. Therefore, He says about both groups that they will "*abide [there] as long as the heavens and the earth endure, unless your Lord wills it otherwise.*" (11: 107 and 108) This is repeated on every occasion so as to make it clear that no exception can be made. Human logic has no say on this other than what is stated in the Qur'ān.

In this way, we can appreciate the significance of this verse that states God's absolute power in His dominion in which He has no partner, where everything rightly extols His praises.

The One and Only

We are then introduced to another truth that may be greater and more profound than the previous ones: it is the truth that the only true entity is God – limitless is He in His glory. Therefore, He encompasses

everything and knows everything: "*He is the First and the Last, the Outer and the Inner. He has full knowledge of all things.*" (Verse 3) He is the First, which means that nothing was before Him; and He is the Last, which means that nothing remains after Him. He is the Outer, which means that nothing is above Him; and He is the Inner, which means that nothing is beyond Him. The first two attributes encompass the nature of time, and the other two the nature of place. The human mind may look everywhere, but it will find that nothing has any entity except God. Indeed all qualities of existence apply to Him alone. The very existence of the human mind materializes only through God's existence, which is the only true existence. Everything else receives its existence from Him. This is the basic truth that gives everything its nature. Nothing has an independent existence beyond this truth.

"*He has full knowledge of all things.*" (Verse 3) His is the knowledge of the truth absolute. Since every existence is derived from God, it is included in His absolute knowledge, which belongs to Him alone. No one shares in God's knowledge, much as people may get to know some aspects of the nature of their own world. Still, they will only know about what appears to them.

If this great truth is well established in a person's heart, why should he give any consideration to anything in the universe other than God? Nothing, including that very heart, has any true existence other than what it derives from that great truth. Everything else is a transitory delusion. Only God remains, as He is the only One who is eternal. Until this great truth is firmly established in our hearts, we should look at this Qur'ānic verse, contemplate and truly appreciate its message.

Sufis upheld this truth and went far and wide with it. Some of them said they could see God in everything in the universe, while others said they saw God beyond everything, and others still said that as they saw God, they could see no one else in the universe. These statements, inadequate as they are, simply point to the truth. What the Sufis are generally criticized for is that their concept led them to neglect life. Islam though is a balanced way of life. It wants the human heart to appreciate this truth, live with it and for it, while at the same time discharging all incumbent duties as vicegerents of this earth. Each person should work hard to implement the divine code of life on earth. Such implementation

is the result of a balanced appreciation of this great truth, consistent with the nature of man and the nature of the universe as created by God.

Creation, Knowledge and Dominion

Now the *sūrah* tells us how other truths branched out from that great one:

> *It is He who created the heavens and the earth in six days and established Himself on the throne. He knows all that goes into the earth and all that comes out of it; all that descends from the skies and all that ascends to them. He is with you wherever you may be; and God sees all that you do. His is the dominion over the heavens and the earth. Everything goes back to God. He causes the night to pass into the day, and the day to pass into the night; and He has full knowledge of what is in people's hearts.* (Verses 4–6)

These verses mention several truths: God's creation of the heavens and the earth; His establishing Himself on the throne; His knowledge of particular matters about His creation; His presence with everyone wherever they happen to be; the return of everything to Him; His conduct of the affairs of this world; and His knowledge of what is in people's hearts. All these spring out of the first great truth, but their presentation against this universal background gives them special effect. The heavens and the earth strike awe in our hearts by their expanse, beauty, harmony, accuracy of position and movement and in the consistency of their phenomena. Like the human heart, they are God's creatures. Thus, they too relate to man's heart. They strike some heavenly tunes on it when man looks and reflects on their creation. They say to man that they are all created by God, and that they extol His praises. Man should do the same. Like them, he should derive the truth of his existence from God's existence.

The six days in which God created the heavens and earth are known only to God. Our own days are accidental results of the earth's rotation in relation to the sun. This earth day came into existence after the creation of the earth and the sun. Therefore, we cannot apply this earth day to the

creation of the universe. We, therefore, leave such knowledge to God. He gives us such information in due course, if He so pleases.

The same applies to the throne. We believe in it as God has mentioned it, but we do not know its nature. As for God 'establishing' Himself on the throne, we can say that it is an expression that stresses God's control of all His creation. This is based on what the Qur'ān says and, as a result, we know for certain that God does not change situation or position. He is not unestablished on the throne in one situation and then in another established. To say, as some scholars do, that we believe in God's establishing Himself on the throne without knowing how does not give us an adequate explanation of the phrase "*and established Himself on the throne.*" It is preferable to say that this refers to God's absolute control of all creation. To so explain this does not depart from our method of abstaining from personal views about the meaning of things that do not belong to our world. Instead, we are relying on what the Qur'ān states and the impression it gives of God and His attributes.

Added to creation and control is absolute and careful knowledge. The Qur'ān describes the extent of this knowledge in a marvellous way, one that captures our minds as we try to follow it against the great expanse of the universe in a never-ceasing movement. This is far more than mere knowledge. It is an inspiring image that captures imaginations: "*He knows all that goes into the earth and all that comes out of it; all that descends from the skies and all that ascends to them.*" (Verse 4)

At every moment, countless numbers of creatures and things enter the earth, and countless others go out from it. Likewise, at every moment, unimaginable numbers of raindrops, rays, meteors, comets, angels, secret objects, etc. come down from the skies and similar numbers of visible and invisible creatures ascend to them. This short Qur'ānic statement refers to this ever-continuous multi-way movement and to great events that are beyond count. It leaves our minds looking everywhere, watching what goes into the earth or out of it, and what comes down from the skies or goes up into them. In this way we can have a glimpse of God's perfect knowledge as He is aware of everything that takes place everywhere. Our minds can thus roam in God's universe while we are still placed on earth. We travel on with alert senses, shuddering at the majesty of what we experience.

As our minds continue looking at the great expanse of the universe, the Qur'ān brings us back to ourselves and touches our inner feelings. We learn that God is with us, looking at us and seeing our actions. He is so close: "*He is with you wherever you may be; and God sees all that you do.*" (Verse 4) This is a factual statement, not a figurative one. God is with everyone and everything, at all times and in all places. He sees everything every creature does. This is a great truth. When we fully understand it, we experience a sense of awe together with a sense of joy as we learn that He is with us. This true statement is enough, when fully understood, to elevate us above earthly considerations, while keeping us all the time on our guard, wary of indulgence in what is unbecoming.

Once more the *sūrah* mentions God's dominion, putting it in a different context: "*His is the dominion over the heavens and the earth. Everything goes back to God.*" (Verse 5) This was mentioned the first time in the context of granting life, causing death and absolute power. Here, it is mentioned in the context of the return of everything to God. Such return closely relates to dominion over the universe. Appreciating this truth ensures that our hearts and minds never turn to anyone other than God in any situation or for any matter, at any time. Whatever we ask, we ask of God, and whatever we do will be done only to please God. Thus we are sure to follow the right way in public and private, in action and rest, in feelings and leanings, always knowing that none other than God can provide any help or protection against any adverse eventuality.

This opening concludes with a reference to a gentle aspect of God's power we see around us in the universe, and within us in our inner feelings: "*He causes the night to pass into the day, and the day to pass into the night; and He has full knowledge of what is in people's hearts.*" (Verse 6) The passing of the night into the day and the day into the night is a continuous and gentle movement. This may mean that the night extends taking part of the day at one stage and the day extends at another stage taking part of the night. Or it may mean the actual penetration of the night into the day at the time of sunset and the penetration of the day into night at the time of sunrise. A similarly gentle action is the knowledge of what is in people's hearts, which means their guarded

secrets that are told to no one. The feeling of God's hand pushing the night into the day and the day into the night, in a very subtle and gentle way, makes our minds sensitive and reflective. The same can be said about feeling that God is fully aware of inner thoughts and feelings.

Degrees of Believers

Having softened our hearts with this opening, the *sūrah* calls on all people to believe and be ready to sacrifice money and property. The opening has made us ready to listen and pay full attention. Yet the address also brings its own inspiring touches and encouraging tones:

> *Believe in God and His Messenger, and give [in charity] of that of which He has made you trustees. Those of you who believe and give [in charity] will have a great reward. Why should you not believe in God when the Messenger calls upon you to believe in your Lord, and He has already taken a pledge from you, if you are true believers? It is He who bestows from on high clear revelations to His servant, to lead you out of the deep darkness into light. God is indeed most compassionate to you, ever merciful. Why should you not spend freely in the cause of God, seeing that God's alone is the heritage of the heavens and the earth? Those of you who gave and fought [for God's cause] before the victory are not like others: they are higher in rank than those who gave and fought afterwards, although God has promised the ultimate good to all of them. God is well aware of all that you do.* (Verses 7–10)

Here, God is addressing the hearts He has created. He knows them, knows what influences them, as well as what feelings they harbour. He knows that for faith to be pure and well established in our hearts so that it gives results in practical life is very hard. He knows how hard and long the struggle is for hearts to be ready to sacrifice purely for His sake. Therefore, the *sūrah* brings in such a host of factors and puts before us a number of universal truths. Their combined effect makes us measure things with the accurate measure of the great truth. The Qur'ān deals with these hearts time and again, step after step. It is not satisfied with a single address or influence presenting the case. Hence advocates of

the divine faith are well advised to reflect on the way the Qur'ān treats people's hearts, so that they can follow its guidance.

The beat at the *sūrah*'s opening is so powerful and profound that it shakes and softens hardened hearts, making them sensitive. The Qur'ān, however, does not use only those influences as it calls on people to believe and to be charitable: "*Believe in God and His Messenger, and give [in charity] of that of which He has made you trustees.*" (Verse 7) The addressees now are Muslims, yet they are called upon to believe in God and His Messenger. This means that they are called upon to ensure that the truth of faith, in its full meaning, takes hold of their hearts. This is a fine touch. They are also called upon to spend in charity, and this call is also coupled with an inspiring touch. They do not spend out of their own property, but rather out of the portion of God's kingdom that He has given them on trust. It is He who has the '*dominion over the heavens and the earth*,' which means that it is He who made the human race generally trustees over a part of His property. It is He who '*grants life and causes death*.' In this way He passes the trust from one generation to another.

Thus, this instruction is linked to what the opening of the *sūrah* said of universal facts, before it makes people ashamed of their behaviour before God. It is He who has given them all they have. What then will they say when He asks them to give in charity some of what He has given them? It is God who gives everything, and what He has will never end. What, then, stops them giving in charity when what they have depends on what God granted them. The *sūrah* does not merely give them this reminder, with all its connotations of shame, kindness and hope. Instead, it also gives them another incentive, making them aspire to more of what God bestows: "*Those of you who believe and give [in charity] will have a great reward.*" (Verse 7) How can anyone abstain from belief and giving in charity when they are shown such limitless kindness and generosity?

The *sūrah* goes further presenting more incentives to believe and accept the divine message. This time it highlights facts from people's own lives and what takes place in their very midst: "*Why should you not believe in God when the Messenger calls upon you to believe in your Lord,*

and He has already taken a pledge from you, if you are true believers? It is He who bestows from on high clear revelations to His servant, to lead you out of the deep darkness into light. God is indeed most compassionate to you, ever merciful." (Verses 8–9) The *sūrah* asks: what stops them from being truly believers when the Prophet calls on them to believe, and when they have already given him pledges of allegiance? What stops them from higher degrees of faith in God when it is He who bestows on His servant clear revelations that are sure to replace their error, doubt and anxiety with the light of faith and certainty? These are indeed aspects of God's compassion and mercy that He bestows on all.

The fact that the Prophet was among those people, calling on them to believe, addressing them with God's own words, establishing a link between them and God which they felt within their own souls was a great blessing, one that we now find difficult to imagine. That period of revelation when the Prophet was living among the Muslims was indeed remarkable. It was a time when God – limitless is He in His glory – addressed man, whom He created, through His servant, (peace be upon him), in a kindly and compassionate way. He said to them: 'Take this and leave that. This is My way, so follow it. You have slipped here, so pick up this rope leading to Me. You have erred and sinned, so repent; My door remains open, so come forward and never let despair creep into you, for My grace will erase all. You man! You said this and that which is wrong; or intended such and such which is a sin; or committed that, which is an act of disobedience. Therefore, come now before Me, declare your repentance, purging yourself of all that and return to My fold. And you man! Here is the solution to the problem you have been struggling with; or this is the answer to the question that has been troubling you; or this is the value of the deed you have committed.'

It is God who says this to people. They live under His care, feeling that He is truly and actually with them, listening to their complaints in the middle of the night and providing their solutions, guiding their every step.

This is something too great to imagine by a person who did not live during that period. The people these verses address actually lived through it, and yet they needed this treatment and these compassionate touches and reminders. This is another aspect of God's grace added to the first

aspect. Both can be appreciated by us who did not have the blessing of living during that remarkable period. "The Prophet said once to his Companions: 'Which believers do you think most remarkable?' They said: 'The angels.' He said: 'Why would they not believe when they are with their Lord?' They rejoined: 'The prophets, then.' He said: 'Why would they not believe when revelations were given to them from on high?' Said they: 'Then we ourselves.' He said: 'Why would you not believe when I am in your midst? The most remarkable of believers are people who come after you, look at scriptures and believe in what is in them'." [Related by al-Bukhārī.]

It is true what the Prophet says. It is true that the gulf is indeed wide. The pointers and incentives to faith in their case were great and remarkable. Hence the *sūrah* asks: 'Why would you not believe?' Then, it requires them to translate their faith into reality, if they are truly believers.

Classes of Actions

The *sūrah* then adds the incentive to spend in charity, putting this in an emphatic way: "*Why should you not spend freely in the cause of God, seeing that God's alone is the heritage of the heavens and the earth?*" (Verse 10) This reference takes us back to the fact already mentioned in the opening verses: "*His is the dominion over the heavens and the earth. Everything goes back to God.*" (Verse 5) The heavens and the earth are His own property and they revert back to Him. What has been assigned to people on trust will also go back to Him as part of this inheritance. Why should they, then, not be charitable when He is asking them to spend in charity? When this is put into perspective, there can be no justification for stinginess.

The elite community of the early believers, the Muhājirīn and the Anṣār, came forward with what they could of sacrifice, in life and property, during a very hard time, before the great triumph was achieved. The victory mentioned here may refer to either the fall of Makkah to Islam, or to the signing of the peace treaty at al-Ḥudaybiyah. Both were events that greatly consolidated the position of Islam at a time when it was still besieged by enemies on all fronts. These people offered their

sacrifices to God, entertaining no thought of worldly gain or currying favour with a powerful Muslim state, for there was none. Their sacrifice was the result of a choice they made for God's sake. It was in support of a faith they wholeheartedly accepted and loved, valuing it dearer than their lives and properties. Yet what they sacrificed was, in quantity, much less than what those who flocked to Islam after its victory were able to sacrifice. Some of these offered sacrifices, stopping at the amount they heard the early Muslims gave. Therefore, the Qur'ān gives these offerings their true values, making it clear that it is not the quantity that determines the value; rather, it is the motive pointing to the truth of faith: "*Those of you who gave and fought [for God's cause] before the victory are not like others: they are higher in rank than those who gave and fought afterwards.*" (Verse 10)

A person who makes financial sacrifices and fights when the faith he believes in is struggling against great odds, able to call on the support of only a few, and when there is little hope of personal gain is totally different from the one who makes such sacrifices and fights at the time of security, when supporters are plentiful and victory is assured. The first is totally dedicated to his faith, placing his complete trust in God, with no quick gains to be hoped for. Nothing but faith urges him to make such sacrifices. The other always finds those who encourage him to do good deeds, even when his intention is right and he is totally dedicated to faith. Anas reports: "Some verbal disagreement occurred between Khālid ibn al-Walīd and 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn 'Awf. Khālid said to 'Abd al-Raḥmān: 'You take pride against us because of the period you had ahead of us.'[1] We heard that this was mentioned to the Prophet. He said: 'Leave my Companions alone. By Him who holds my soul in His hand, should any of you spend the like of Mount Uḥud, [or he might have said, 'the weight of mountains'] in gold, he would not achieve the like of their deeds'." [Related by Aḥmad.] The Prophet is also authentically quoted as saying: "Do not curse my Companions. By Him who holds my soul in His hand, should any of you spend the like of Mount Uḥud

1. Khālid, who believed in Islam shortly before the conquest of Makkah but after the peace treaty of al-Ḥudaybiyah, meant that 'Abd al-Raḥmān's position in the Muslim community was only due to his being among the early Muslims. In fact, 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn 'Awf was one of the first ten people to accept Islam. – Editor's note.

in gold, he would not achieve the measure of any one of them, not even half that measure."[2]

Having established the true measure of both groups in God's sight, the *sūrah* now states that they will all reside in heaven: "*Although God has promised the ultimate good to all of them.*" (Verse 10) Despite their difference in degree, they have all done well. This difference in rank and the promise of the great reward to all are due to God's knowledge of their respective situations, intentions, determination and actions: "*God is well aware of all that you do.*" (Verse 10) This is a reference to real intentions beyond apparent actions. It is after all the intention that determines the value of any action.

A Breathtaking Scene

The *sūrah* goes a stage further in motivating addressees to be true believers and to make financial sacrifices. It provides further incentives and inspiration:

> *Who will offer God a generous loan, which He will repay in multiples and will generously reward him? On the day when you see all believers, men and women, with their light spreading rapidly before them and to their right, [they will be told], 'The good news for you today is that you shall for ever abide in gardens through which running waters flow. This is indeed the supreme triumph.' On that day the hypocrites, men and women, will say to the believers, 'Wait for us! Let us have a ray of your light!' They will be told: 'Turn back and seek some other light.' A wall with a gate will be raised between them: within it will be mercy, and outside will be suffering. [Those without] will call out to those [within], 'Were we not with you?' They will reply, 'Yes, but you allowed yourselves to be led into temptation, you wavered, you doubted, and you were deceived by false hopes until God's command came to pass, and indeed you let your deceptive thoughts about God*

2. These *aḥādīth*, and similar ones, provide a definite meaning to the group that formed the Prophet's Companions. They are those who accepted Islam in its early days. The Prophet used to say to the Muslims around him, who ranked among his Companions: 'Leave my Companions alone…' This indicates that he was referring to a special companionship. Referring to Abū Bakr, he once said: 'Leave my Companion alone.'

> *delude you. Today no ransom will be accepted from you or from the unbelievers. The fire shall be your home: it is where you belong; and how evil a destination!'* (Verses 11–15)

This address is not merely inspiring; it is captivating. It says to those who are always in need of help, '*Who will offer God a generous loan?*' The mere thought that he, a poor, little human being, can offer a loan to God should make a Muslim rush to do so. People normally compete to lend to someone who is rich – when they, including the rich, are all poor – because they know that repayment is certain. They are proud to lend money to such a wealthy person. So how would they feel when they make a loan to the One who is self-sufficient, worthy of all praise?

The *sūrah*, however, does not leave it at this, but instead promises to repay such a goodly loan, given purely to Him without any thought of pleasing anyone else, in double or multiples. In addition, it promises a very generous reward: "*Who will offer God a generous loan, which He will repay in multiples and will generously reward him?*" (Verse 11) The *sūrah* then presents a brilliant image of this generous reward in a scene of the day when this is granted: "*On the day when you see all believers, men and women, with their light spreading rapidly before them and to their right.*" (Verse 12)

The scene presented here is unique both in framework and detail. It is a scene brought to life by a dialogue that enhances the clearly delineated image. As we read, a lustrous image is drawn before us in which we see believing men and women and a gently shining light radiating through them and flowing to their right. These human bodies are beaming with a light that spreads from them so that it can be seen both before them and to their right. It is the light into which God brought them out of darkness; the light that beamed into their souls to overshadow their original nature. Or is it, perhaps, that the light from which God created this universe and all who live in it,[3] now appears in this group of people who have been true to their nature?

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3. It is now believed that the original substance from which the universe was created is light, and that it is composed of atoms, and that the atom is, in essence, radiation. This theory may be the closest to the truth because it appears to be in line with the Qur'ān.

We then listen to the address made to believers, men and women, combining honour with good news: "*The good news for you today is that you shall for ever abide in gardens through which running waters flow. This is indeed the supreme triumph.*" (Verse 12)

The scene does not end with this pleasant image. We have a contrasting one in which we see the hypocrites, men and women, lost in error, abandoned and humiliated. They try to cling to the believers: "*On that day the hypocrites, men and women, will say to the believers, 'Wait for us! Let us have a ray of your light!'*" (Verse 13) Wherever the believers look, their gentle, transparent light spreads before them. How can hypocrites, who have spent all their lives in darkness, enjoy even a ray of that light? A voice coming from where they do not know tells them: "*Turn back and seek some other light.*" (Verse 13) This seems to be said in a sarcastic way, reminding them of what they used to do in their first lives when they engaged in hypocrisy, conspiring in the dark. They are told to go back to this world where light is sought through good action. On this Last Day, no light can be sought.

Immediately a barrier is erected to separate the believers from the hypocrites. These two groups were mixed in their first lives, but now they are sorted out: "*A wall with a gate will be raised between them: within it will be mercy, and outside will be suffering.*" (Verse 13) It appears that they cannot see through this wall, but it does not stop the people on both sides talking to and hearing each other. Now the hypocrites call out to the believers asking them: "*Were we not with you?*" (Verse 14) Were we not living with you at the same place, and were we not resurrected with you on the same plane? The believers confirm this, but their ways were different: "*They will reply, 'Yes, but you allowed yourselves to be led into temptation.*" Thus you turned yourselves away from divine guidance. "*You wavered.*" You did not make the right choice. "*You doubted.*" You could not bring yourselves to have certainty of faith and make the right choice. "*And you were deceived by false hopes.*" You were always deluding yourselves thinking that by holding the stick in the middle would ensure your safety in all situations. "*Until God's command came to pass,*" and all was lost. "*Indeed you let your deceptive thoughts about God delude you.*" (Verse 14) These thoughts were whispered by Satan who deceived you by raising false hopes before your eyes.

The believers go on with this reminder and statement, as if they are the ones assigned to make the judgement: "*Today no ransom will be accepted from you or from the unbelievers. The fire shall be your home: it is where you belong; and how evil a destination!*" (Verse 15) Or perhaps this is said by angels, or maybe by God Almighty.

From an artistic point of view, the image of light in this particular instance is most appropriate. The *sūrah* is speaking about hypocrites, men and women, who conceal their feelings and intentions, giving false appearances. They live in darkness, engage in hypocrisy and conspiracy and cause trouble. Light will expose what has been carefully hidden. Moreover, it provides a bright image that contrasts with the grimly dark one of hypocrisy. It is the best image to radiate the whole scene, and to flow before the believers and to their right while the hypocrites remain lost in what amounts to double darkness.

What heart would not aspire to have that sort of light on that day? What heart would not respond to the call to donate in plenty when listening to such an inspiring discourse? Thus, the Qur'ān deals with human hearts in a steady, consistent way, basing its address on perfect knowledge of their nature, how they are influenced and how they respond.

The second part of the *sūrah* continues this same line of address and inspiration.

2

A Race to Forgiveness

أَلَمْ يَأْنِ لِلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا أَن تَخْشَعَ قُلُوبُهُمْ لِذِكْرِ اللَّهِ وَمَا نَزَلَ مِنَ الْحَقِّ وَلَا يَكُونُوا كَالَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْكِتَابَ مِن قَبْلُ فَطَالَ عَلَيْهِمُ الْأَمَدُ فَقَسَتْ قُلُوبُهُمْ وَكَثِيرٌ مِّنْهُمْ فَاسِقُونَ ﴿١٦﴾

Is it not time for believers that their hearts should feel humble at the remembrance of God and the truth that has been bestowed from on high, and not to be like those who were granted revelations before them and whose hearts have hardened with the passing of time? Many of these are now transgressors! (16)

اعْلَمُوا أَنَّ اللَّهَ يُحْيِي الْأَرْضَ بَعْدَ مَوْتِهَا قَدْ بَيَّنَّا لَكُمُ الْآيَاتِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَعْقِلُونَ ﴿١٧﴾

Know that God restores the earth to life after it has been lifeless. We have made Our revelations clear to you so that you may use your reason. (17)

إِنَّ الْمُصَّدِّقِينَ وَالْمُصَّدِّقَاتِ وَأَقْرَضُوا اللَّهَ قَرْضًا حَسَنًا يُضَاعَفُ لَهُمْ وَلَهُمْ أَجْرٌ كَرِيمٌ ﴿١٨﴾

Those who give generously in charity, men and women, and thus offer a goodly loan to God, [their loan] will be repaid in multiples, and they will have a generous reward. (18)

Those who believe in God and His messengers are the ones who uphold the truth, and who will bear witness to it before their Lord. They will have their reward and their light. Those who disbelieve and deny Our revelations are the dwellers of the blazing fire. (19)

وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ بِٱللَّهِ وَرُسُلِهِۦٓ أُو۟لَـٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلصِّدِّيقُونَ ۖ وَٱلشُّهَدَآءُ عِندَ رَبِّهِمْ لَهُمْ أَجْرُهُمْ وَنُورُهُمْ ۖ وَٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ وَكَذَّبُوا۟ بِـَٔايَـٰتِنَآ أُو۟لَـٰٓئِكَ أَصْحَـٰبُ ٱلْجَحِيمِ ﴿١٩﴾

Know that the life of this world is but a play, a passing delight, a beautiful show, a cause of boasting among you and a quest for more riches and children. It is like the rain that causes the plants to grow, and thus gives delight to the sowers. Then it withers, and you can see it turn yellow, and in the end it crumbles into dust. In the life to come there is terrible suffering, as well as God's forgiveness and His goodly acceptance. The life of this world is no more than an illusory pleasure. (20)

ٱعْلَمُوٓا۟ أَنَّمَا ٱلْحَيَوٰةُ ٱلدُّنْيَا لَعِبٌ وَلَهْوٌ وَزِينَةٌ وَتَفَاخُرٌۢ بَيْنَكُمْ وَتَكَاثُرٌ فِى ٱلْأَمْوَٰلِ وَٱلْأَوْلَـٰدِ ۖ كَمَثَلِ غَيْثٍ أَعْجَبَ ٱلْكُفَّارَ نَبَاتُهُۥ ثُمَّ يَهِيجُ فَتَرَىٰهُ مُصْفَرًّا ثُمَّ يَكُونُ حُطَـٰمًا ۖ وَفِى ٱلْـَٔاخِرَةِ عَذَابٌ شَدِيدٌ وَمَغْفِرَةٌ مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ وَرِضْوَٰنٌ ۚ وَمَا ٱلْحَيَوٰةُ ٱلدُّنْيَآ إِلَّا مَتَـٰعُ ٱلْغُرُورِ ﴿٢٠﴾

Vie with one another in seeking to attain your Lord's forgiveness, and a paradise as vast as the heavens and the earth, prepared for those who believe in God and His messengers. Such is God's bounty which He grants to whomever He pleases. God's bounty is great indeed. (21)

سَابِقُوٓا۟ إِلَىٰ مَغْفِرَةٍ مِّن رَّبِّكُمْ وَجَنَّةٍ عَرْضُهَا كَعَرْضِ ٱلسَّمَآءِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ أُعِدَّتْ لِلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ بِٱللَّهِ وَرُسُلِهِۦ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ فَضْلُ ٱللَّهِ يُؤْتِيهِ مَن يَشَآءُ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ ذُو ٱلْفَضْلِ ٱلْعَظِيمِ ﴿٢١﴾

No incident can take place, either on earth or in yourselves, unless it be recorded in a decree before We bring it into being – that is easy for God – (22)

مَآ أَصَابَ مِن مُّصِيبَةٍ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ
وَلَا فِىٓ أَنفُسِكُمْ إِلَّا فِى كِتَٰبٍ
مِّن قَبْلِ أَن نَّبْرَأَهَآ ۚ إِنَّ ذَٰلِكَ عَلَى
ٱللَّهِ يَسِيرٌ ﴿٢٢﴾

so you need not grieve for what you miss or be overjoyed at what you gain. God does not love those who are arrogant and boastful; (23)

لِّكَيْلَا تَأْسَوْا۟ عَلَىٰ مَا فَاتَكُمْ
وَلَا تَفْرَحُوا۟ بِمَآ ءَاتَىٰكُمْ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ
لَا يُحِبُّ كُلَّ مُخْتَالٍ فَخُورٍ ﴿٢٣﴾

[nor] those who are niggardly and bid others to be niggardly. Those who turn away should remember that God alone is self-sufficient, worthy of praise. (24)

ٱلَّذِينَ يَبْخَلُونَ وَيَأْمُرُونَ ٱلنَّاسَ
بِٱلْبُخْلِ ۗ وَمَن يَتَوَلَّ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ هُوَ
ٱلْغَنِىُّ ٱلْحَمِيدُ ﴿٢٤﴾

We sent Our messengers with clear evidence of the truth, and through them We bestowed the book from on high, setting the balance, so that people could uphold justice. We have also sent down iron, with its mighty strength and diverse uses for mankind. Thus God may mark out those who would stand up for Him and His messengers, even though He is beyond the reach of human perception. God is indeed powerful, almighty. (25)

لَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا رُسُلَنَا بِٱلْبَيِّنَٰتِ وَأَنزَلْنَا
مَعَهُمُ ٱلْكِتَٰبَ وَٱلْمِيزَانَ لِيَقُومَ
ٱلنَّاسُ بِٱلْقِسْطِ ۖ وَأَنزَلْنَا ٱلْحَدِيدَ فِيهِ
بَأْسٌ شَدِيدٌ وَمَنَٰفِعُ لِلنَّاسِ وَلِيَعْلَمَ
ٱللَّهُ مَن يَنصُرُهُۥ وَرُسُلَهُۥ بِٱلْغَيْبِ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ
قَوِىٌّ عَزِيزٌ ﴿٢٥﴾

And We sent Noah and Abraham, and gave prophethood and revelation to their descendants. Among them there are some who were rightly guided, but many who were transgressors. (26)

وَلَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا نُوحًا وَإِبْرَٰهِيمَ وَجَعَلْنَا فِي ذُرِّيَّتِهِمَا ٱلنُّبُوَّةَ وَٱلْكِتَٰبَ ۖ فَمِنْهُم مُّهْتَدٍ ۖ وَكَثِيرٌ مِّنْهُمْ فَٰسِقُونَ ﴿٢٦﴾

We sent other messengers to follow in their footsteps. After these We sent Jesus, son of Mary. We gave him the Gospel and put compassion and mercy in the hearts of those who truly follow him. As for monastic asceticism, We did not enjoin it upon them. They invented it themselves out of a desire for God's goodly acceptance. Even so, they did not observe it as it should properly be observed. So We gave those of them who truly believed their due reward, but many of them were transgressors. (27)

ثُمَّ قَفَّيْنَا عَلَىٰٓ ءَاثَٰرِهِم بِرُسُلِنَا وَقَفَّيْنَا بِعِيسَى ٱبْنِ مَرْيَمَ وَءَاتَيْنَٰهُ ٱلْإِنجِيلَ وَجَعَلْنَا فِي قُلُوبِ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱتَّبَعُوهُ رَأْفَةً وَرَحْمَةً وَرَهْبَانِيَّةً ٱبْتَدَعُوهَا مَا كَتَبْنَٰهَا عَلَيْهِمْ إِلَّا ٱبْتِغَآءَ رِضْوَٰنِ ٱللَّهِ فَمَا رَعَوْهَا حَقَّ رِعَايَتِهَا ۖ فَـَٔاتَيْنَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ مِنْهُمْ أَجْرَهُمْ ۖ وَكَثِيرٌ مِّنْهُمْ فَٰسِقُونَ ﴿٢٧﴾

Believers, remain God-fearing and believe in His Messenger. He will then give you a double measure of His mercy, and will provide you with a light to walk in, and will forgive you. God is Much-Forgiving, Ever Merciful. (28)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ ٱتَّقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ وَءَامِنُوا۟ بِرَسُولِهِۦ يُؤْتِكُمْ كِفْلَيْنِ مِن رَّحْمَتِهِۦ وَيَجْعَل لَّكُمْ نُورًا تَمْشُونَ بِهِۦ وَيَغْفِرْ لَكُمْ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿٢٨﴾

The people of earlier revelations should know that they have no power whatever over any of God's bounty. All bounty is in God's hand: He grants it to whomever He wills. God's bounty is limitless. (29	لِّئَلَّا يَعْلَمَ أَهْلُ ٱلْكِتَٰبِ أَلَّا يَقْدِرُونَ عَلَىٰ شَىْءٍ مِّن فَضْلِ ٱللَّهِ وَأَنَّ ٱلْفَضْلَ بِيَدِ ٱللَّهِ يُؤْتِيهِ مَن يَشَآءُ وَٱللَّهُ ذُو ٱلْفَضْلِ ٱلْعَظِيمِ ﴿٢٩﴾

Overview

This part continues with the main theme of the *sūrah*: fulfilment of the true meaning of faith in people's hearts so that they come forward with financial sacrifice purely for God's sake. It includes inspiring touches similar to those found in the first part. It begins with a note of remonstration addressed to the believers who had not at that time attained the standard God wanted them to attain. It puts before them the situation of communities from among the people of earlier revelations whose hearts had hardened as time went by and, as a result, transgressed. The believers are warned against ending up in the same position, but a pleasant prospect is also put before them, telling them that God gives hearts a fresh life in the same way as He restores life to the earth after it has been lifeless.

Then we take a look at the next world. This is coupled with a repeat call to offer a generous loan to God, one that promises multiple repayment and a generous reward. This, thus, mirrors what was stated in the first part of the *sūrah*.

All values of this present life are then put on God's scales and weighed against the values of the life to come. The first seem like small and light playthings while the others appear serious, capturing our attention. Believers are, therefore, invited to hasten to those real values so that they can enjoy their results in a heaven that is immeasurably vast. Furthermore, this heaven has been made ready to receive those who believe in God and His messengers.

The believers are then brought back to their present condition in this life and its events. They realize that whatever happens, good or bad, is by God's will. Thus, financial sacrifice becomes easy for them and the

luxuries of this world are of no consequence. Instead, all their thoughts and feelings aspire to heaven.

The *sūrah* then presents an aspect of the history of the divine message, reflecting its unity of approach and direction. Those who deviate from this line, no matter what generation they belong to, are transgressors. Again, an image of what people who were given scriptures in the past did is shown to the believers. This concludes with a final address to them to remain God-fearing and to truly believe in Him and His Messenger so that He will then give them a double share of His grace, provide them with light in their lives and forgive them their slips. God's bounty is not limited to the people of earlier revelations, as such people allege. It is limitless and remains in God's hands, who grants it to whom He wills.

We thus see that from start to finish the *sūrah* is closely knit. It follows a consistent line playing varying and similar notes and using repetition to the extent that is needed. All to make a strong impression on our hearts.

A Higher Degree of Faith

> *Is it not time for believers that their hearts should feel humble at the remembrance of God and the truth that has been bestowed from on high, and not to be like those who were granted revelations before them and whose hearts have hardened with the passing of time? Many of these are now transgressors! Know that God restores the earth to life after it has been lifeless. We have made Our revelations clear to you so that you may use your reason.* (Verses 16–17)

This profoundly touching remonstration by God, the Ever Merciful, urges a complete response from hearts that have been slow to bask in His grace after He has sent them His Messenger calling on them to believe. He granted him revelations that are sure to take them out of darkness into light. He has also shown them enlightening signs in the universe around them and in all His creation. This note of remonstration overflows with tenderness as it arouses in them feelings of His majesty so that they humble themselves when He is mentioned. In this way can they receive the truth bestowed from on high with what it deserves of

obedience, submission and obedience to God. This is coupled with a touch of criticism for their slow response: *"Is it not time for believers that their hearts should feel humble at the remembrance of God and the truth that has been bestowed from on high."* (Verse 16)

To this note of urging and encouragement is added a warning against slackening and negligence. It tells them how hearts harden when time passes without refreshment provided by remembrance of God and His truth: *"And not to be like those who were granted revelations before them and whose hearts have hardened with the passing of time? Many of these are now transgressors."* (Verse 16) When hearts harden, all they produce is sin and disobedience. The human heart is subject to quick changes, it easily forgets. When it brightens up it is like a ray of light spreading life. Should it stay long without reminders, it becomes blunted, hardened and loses its light. Therefore, it requires constant reminders so that it remains soft and enlightened. It must always be alert so as not to harden.

If a heart does become hardened, this must not, however, lead to despair. It can be brought back to life and revived with divine light. God restores the earth to life. After it has been lifeless for long, it quickens and produces plants, flowers, fruits and rich varieties in plenty. The same applies to hearts, by God's will: *"Know that God restores the earth to life after it has been lifeless."* (Verse 17) This Qur'ān has plenty of what brings hearts back to life, supplying them with proper nourishment, just like lifeless earth is restored to life: *"We have made Our revelations clear to you so that you may use your reason."* (Verse 17)

In the Highest Position

A new incentive to sacrifice now follows:

> *Those who give generously in charity, men and women, and thus offer a goodly loan to God, [their loan] will be repaid in multiples, and they will have a generous reward. Those who believe in God and His messengers are the ones who uphold the truth, and who will bear witness to it before their Lord. They will have their reward and their light. Those who disbelieve and deny Our revelations are the dwellers of the blazing fire.* (Verses 18–19)

Those who give generously in charity do not couple their action by pressing for favours from the recipients of that charity. In all this, they do not deal with people. They deal directly with God, offering Him a loan. What better incentive for charity! Can there be a more profound feeling for a charitable believer than that he is giving a loan to God who has no need of anyone and who repays good deeds in multiples. Can he hope for anything better than dealing with the One who has dominion over the entire universe, and that whatever he spends in charity will be given back in multiples together with a generous reward?

Those who uphold the truth enjoy a very high status, as indicated by several statements made by the Prophet. Yet this high status is, by the grace of God, easy to achieve. It is not reserved for any individual or group. Whoever truly believes in God and His messengers can aspire to this height. God's grace is without limit: "*Those who believe in God and His messengers are the ones who uphold the truth.*" (Verse 19) This is the distinctive characteristic of this religion. It is a way open to all people, a lofty standard to which all can aspire. There is no privileged position for anyone in particular. Only good action elevates people to the highest level. There is no class system in this religion.

Imām Mālik reports on the authority of Abū Sa'īd al-Khudrī that the Prophet said: "The people of heaven look up to those in lofty mansions above them as you would try to locate a bright star moving away in the far horizon to the east or the west." People asked him whether these are mansions reserved for prophets and whether none other than a prophet achieves them. He said: "By Him who holds my soul in His hand, others achieve them: people who believe in God and in his messengers." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.]

This speaks about belief, which is followed by a reference to sacrificing one's life, speaking about those who '*bear witness*', which is a reference to martyrs. In Arabic, the term '*shahīd*' carries both meanings: "*And who will bear witness to it before their Lord. They will have their reward and their light.*" (Verse 19) The high position given to martyrs is mentioned several times in the Qur'ān, and in numerous statements made by the Prophet. This religion cannot be properly established in human life without having a guarding force, and without a hard struggle. The struggle aims to secure the faith, protect its followers when they face

testing times, and preserve its code from corruption. Therefore, martyrs for God's cause, who are the only ones to deserve this name and to bear witness, have their special status and position close to their Lord.

In an authentic *ḥadīth* the Prophet says: "The spirits of martyrs are in the craws of green birds which fly in heaven unrestricted. They ultimately home back to these lanterns. God looks at them and asks what they wish for. They say: 'We would love to go back to the world so that we can fight again for your cause and be killed like we were the first time.' He will say to them: 'I have already decreed that people will never return there'." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] Anas quotes the Prophet as saying: "None of the people of heaven would ever like to return to this world even though he would have all that the earth contains, except for martyrs who wish to return and be killed ten times fighting for God's cause. This is because of the honour that is given to them." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.]

Thus life seemed too trivial for those who listened to all this and realized what position God grants to martyrs. Imām Mālik reports on the authority of Yaḥyā ibn Sa'īd: "God's Messenger encouraged people to fight for God's cause and he mentioned the garden of heaven. A man from the Anṣār who was eating a few dates as he listened said: 'If I continue sitting here and eating these dates, I am certainly of those who are eager to stay in this life.' He then threw his dates away and pushed forward in the fighting until he was killed."

Having mentioned the positions of those who uphold the truth and those who bear witness to it, the *sūrah* refers to the unbelievers who deny God's revelations: "*Those who disbelieve and deny Our revelations are the dwellers of the blazing fire.*" (Verse 19) Who would wish to abandon a position of honour in order to be among the dwellers of hell?

A Life of Trivialities

The next touch comments on this call to a high standard of faith and the sacrifice of life and property. It shows the life of this world to be too trivial to have any value for people who aspire to heaven.

> *Know that the life of this world is but a play, a passing delight, a beautiful show, a cause of boasting among you and a quest for more*

> *riches and children. It is like the rain that causes the plants to grow, and thus gives delight to the sowers. Then it withers, and you can see it turn yellow, and in the end it crumbles into dust. In the life to come there is terrible suffering, as well as God's forgiveness and His goodly acceptance. The life of this world is no more than an illusory pleasure.* (Verse 20)

When evaluated by its own measures and standards, this world appears great indeed. However, when it is looked at against the life to come and its standards, it appears trivial. In the picture drawn in this verse, it looks like children's toys compared to the seriousness of the life to come where people's fates are decided. A play, a passing delight, a beautiful show, mutual boasting, and a quest for riches; this is the truth behind all our apparent hard work and preoccupation. An animated picture gives an example of what this life is like: "*It is like the rain that causes the plants to grow, and thus gives delight to the sowers.*" (Verse 20) The word used in this verse for '*sowers*' is '*kuffār*' which primarily means 'unbelievers'. The choice is deliberate as it provides a clear hint to the fact that unbelievers are delighted by the riches of this world. "*Then it withers, and you can see it turn yellow.*" (Verse 20) It is ready for harvest. It is all temporary, lasting but for a short while. It attains its fullness "*and in the end it crumbles into dust.*" Thus the film of life, shown in a host of lively and familiar images, comes to an end as it all crumbles into dust.

The life to come has a totally different appearance. People should not only take this into account but also prepare themselves for it: "*In the life to come there is terrible suffering, as well as God's forgiveness and His goodly acceptance.*" (Verse 20) It does not end in a moment, like this present world. It does not crumble into nothing like those withered plants. It involves reckoning, accountability, and continuity. "*The life of this world is no more than an illusory pleasure.*" (Verse 20) Its pleasure has no real substance. Its attraction is based on illusions that make people overlook reality.

When we think carefully about all this, it immediately appears true. As the Qur'ān states this truth, it does not want us to ignore the life of this world altogether, or to forget the duty requiring us to build human

life on earth.[4] Rather, it aims to rectify our standards and values so that we rise above the temptation of worldly pleasures, for these are transitory in nature. Rising above such temptations was needed by those addressed by the *sūrah* in order that they make faith their reality. It is also needed by anyone with faith if he wants his faith to become reality. This is not an easy task; it may also ultimately require sacrifice of one's life for it.

A Great Prize to Compete for

The *sūrah* calls the believers to compete in the proper field for the one and only worthwhile prize that will define their permanent status in the everlasting world:

> *Vie with one another in seeking to attain your Lord's forgiveness, and a paradise as vast as the heavens and the earth, prepared for those who believe in God and His messengers. Such is God's bounty which He grants to whomever He pleases. God's bounty is great indeed.* (Verse 21)

Competing in play, pastimes and delightful pursuits, and seeking more riches and offspring are not worthy of adults who have outgrown childish play. The real race aims to win the greatest of all prizes, '*a paradise as vast as the heavens and the earth.*' In the past, before the facts about the vastness of this universe were discovered, people might have thought this verse and similar statements made by the Prophet to be figurative. Today, with observatories indicating the great, endless dimensions of the universe, the reference to the widths of heaven and the lofty mansions seen over the horizon sound factual and need not be treated as figurative. The distance between the earth and the sun, for example, seems insignificant when set against other distances in the universe.

This great prize in the garden of heaven is there for anyone to achieve. All are invited to strive for it. The only requirement to taking part is to believe in God and His Messenger: "*Such is God's bounty which He grants to whomever He pleases. God's bounty is great indeed.*" (Verse 21) God's bounty is not restricted in any way. It is available to all. This is

4. This is discussed in detail in the commentary on verse 51 of *Sūrah* 56 in this volume.

the prize to compete for. A believer must deal with this great existence, not limiting himself or restricting his concerns and feelings to life in this little earthly world. He needs to do this if he is to fulfil the role worthy of a person who has faith, the role that is in conflict with the petty greed of ordinary people, and with erring thoughts, deviant ideas and twisted minds. He will face stiff resistance by falsehood and its exponents, all of whom will defend their positions aggressively. No one can withstand this except a believer who looks at an existence that is greater than this life, bigger than the earth and everlasting.

Earthly standards and values do not represent truth that should be established in a believer's consciousness. In relation to the truth, earthly standards and values are as small as the earth in relation to the universe, and as short as the earth's lifespan to immortality. The difference is simply immeasurable by any earthly standard.

Thus a believer who looks up to the great horizon of the truth rises above the trifling reality of this earth, no matter how large or extensive it appears. Instead, he deals with this great immortal truth, one that belongs to the life to come, and he upholds the values of faith that cannot be swayed by any thing. Such is the role of faith in the life of its advocates.

The Will That Will Be Done

The *sūrah* now adds a profound note about God's will, which will always be done:

> *No incident can take place, either on earth or in yourselves, unless it be recorded in a decree before We bring it into being – that is easy for God – so you need not grieve for what you miss or be overjoyed at what you gain. God does not love those who are arrogant and boastful; [nor] those who are niggardly and bid others to be niggardly. Those who turn away should remember that God alone is self-sufficient, worthy of praise.* (Verses 22–24)

This universe is so perfectly designed that nothing happens in it unless it has been preordained and pre-planned. Nothing occurs as a

result of coincidence or blind accident. Prior to the creation of the earth and those who live and have lived on it, God's perfect and accurate knowledge encompassed every happening seen at its appropriate time. As far as God's knowledge is concerned, there is no past, present or future. Such time demarcations serve a purpose for us, who are mortal, so as to put things within suitable frameworks. We cannot comprehend and distinguish things without limits. In particular, humans need time and place limits. We cannot go beyond these to touch the absolute except in certain flashes when our spirit receives such contact in some way other than that which we normally use to comprehend what is around us. God Almighty is the absolute truth who looks at life and existence in its totality, without boundaries, limits or restraints. This universe, its events and the stages it goes through from its beginning to its end exists in God's knowledge as one complete whole, with no limits or separations of time and place. Every event has its place in an overall design known only to God. Every incident, good or bad, occurring in any part of the earth or to people generally or those addressed at the time of the *sūrah*'s revelation in particular, is entered in that eternal record prior to the earth's creation or people in the form they have been created in: "*That is easy for God.*" (Verse 22)

When our minds contemplate the great truth of existence, we realize that this is the inevitable fact resulting from it. Hence, it gives us peace and reassurance about whatever may happen, good or bad. Thus, we are not overwhelmed with grief when suffering terrible misfortune, nor are we too overjoyed with life's pleasantries: "*So you need not grieve for what you miss or be overjoyed at what you gain.*" (Verse 23) When we look with a broad perspective, remember eternity, and see events in their respective positions as defined in the design of the universe and determined by God's knowledge, this gives us a steadier outlook on passing events. Man panics when he separates himself from the universe and looks at events as though they are accidents that collide with his own small existence. Conversely, when he realizes fully that he and the events that occur to him or to anyone else or to the whole earth are merely molecules in a great body, which is the universe, and that these molecules are all in their right positions in this perfect design, and that they are all mutually complementary, he feels reassured and comfortable. He does not grieve

for what he has missed, nor is he overly joyed with what he gains. He accepts God's will with comfort, realizing that what takes place is what actually should take place.

This is a level to which only the elite few can rise. Other believers are only required not to let their feelings of grief at misfortune or joy at good fortune take them away from their duty to remember God in both situations, attributing everything to Him. They must moderate their feelings in either case. 'Ikrimah says: "Everyone experiences joy and sorrow. Therefore, make your joy an occasion for thanksgiving and your sorrow one for showing patience." Such is the balanced attitude Islam encourages.

"*God does not love those who are arrogant and boastful; [nor] those who are niggardly and bid others to be niggardly.*" (Verses 23–24) The link between what we have been discussing and arrogance and boastfulness on the one hand, and being niggardly and encouraging niggardliness on the other, is that a person who truly feels that whatever befalls him, good or bad, comes from God will not show any of these feelings. It is the one who does not feel this that thinks that the wealth, position or honour he has is of his own making and, therefore, he boasts and behaves arrogantly. He is the one who then becomes niggardly, unwilling to give away any of what he has. He also encourages others to be similarly niggardly in a demonstration that his is the right approach.

"*Those who turn away should remember that God alone is self-sufficient, worthy of praise.*" (Verse 24) When a person spends money in charity, he does so to his own good; when he responds to God's call, he serves his own interest. God needs none of His creatures. He is worthy of all praise, but in need of none.

Far Back in History

The third part of the *sūrah* briefly outlines the history of the divine message, starting with Noah and Abraham. It states its aims and objectives in people's lives, referring briefly to the conditions of the people of earlier revelations, particularly those who followed Jesus (peace be upon him).

> *We sent Our messengers with clear evidence of the truth, and through them We bestowed the book from on high, setting the balance, so that people could uphold justice. We have also sent down iron, with its mighty strength and diverse uses for mankind. Thus God may mark out those who would stand up for Him and His messengers, even though He is beyond the reach of human perception. God is indeed powerful, almighty. And We sent Noah and Abraham, and gave prophethood and revelation to their descendants. Among them there are some who were rightly guided, but many who were transgressors. We sent other messengers to follow in their footsteps. After these We sent Jesus, son of Mary. We gave him the Gospel and put compassion and mercy in the hearts of those who truly follow him. As for monastic asceticism, We did not enjoin it upon them. They invented it themselves out of a desire for God's goodly acceptance. Even so, they did not observe it as it should properly be observed. So We gave those of them who truly believed their due reward, but many of them were transgressors.* (Verses 25–27)

In essence, the divine message is the same. All messengers preached it, equipped with clear evidence of the truth it teaches. Most of them were also given miracles of a preternatural kind. Some were given books of scripture. In reference to this, the *sūrah* says, '*through them We bestowed the book from on high,*' making them all one unit in the same way as all divine revelations are one. This confirms the unity of the divine message. The divine message also sets '*the balance,*' because all divine messages were given to establish a proper balance in human life to which people should refer in their evaluation of actions, events, people, indeed in everything. It is this balance that keeps human life safe from conflicting desires and interests that pull in different directions. The balance does not give special favour to anyone because it works for all on the basis of divine truth. It does no injustice to anyone because God is the Lord of all.

This balance or standard bestowed by God is the only guarantee of safety for humanity in the midst of tempests, earthquakes and other turmoil that overwhelms it as it finds itself in the middle of an ocean of conflicting desires and sentiments, competition and selfishness. Hence it is imperative that people should have an accurately balanced and

steady standard that points them to the truth, justice and fairness with no favouritism whatsoever. The purpose of this balance, then, is "*that people could uphold justice.*" (Verse 25) This accurate balance that is an essential part of divine law is indispensable. Without it, people would not be able to recognize justice. Even if they recognized it, it would not remain steady and consistent in their hands.

"*We have also sent down iron, with its mighty strength and diverse uses for mankind. Thus God may mark out those who would stand up for Him and His messengers, even though He is beyond the reach of human perception.*" (Verse 25) The phrase, '*We have also sent down iron,*' is similar to the statement, '*He has bestowed on you four kinds of cattle in pairs.*' (39: 6) Both refer to God's will and planning as He creates things and events. Thus, they are all sent down, or bestowed from on high, by God's will and wisdom. Use here of the expression '*sent down*' in reference to iron ensures harmony within the verse which speaks of sending down, or bestowing from on high, the book setting the balance. Likewise, everything God creates is according to His accurate planning.

So, God has sent down iron which gives strength in war and peace. In addition to its '*mighty strength*', iron provides '*diverse uses for mankind.*' Indeed the present human civilization is based primarily on iron and its uses. "*Thus God may mark out those who would stand up for Him and His messengers, even though He is beyond the reach of human perception.*" (Verse 25) This is a reference to using arms in *Jihād*, or striving for God's cause. This is the appropriate place to refer to such striving in the *sūrah* that speaks of sacrifice of life and property for God's cause. The comment at the end of the verse explains the meaning of people 'standing up' for Him and His messengers. It means standing up for and advocating His message. God Himself is in no need of support from any quarter: "*God is indeed powerful, almighty.*" (Verse 25)

The *sūrah* then speaks of the unity of the divine message in the men who advocated it, i.e. His messengers. They are all descendants of Noah and Abraham. "*And We sent Noah and Abraham, and gave prophethood and revelation to their descendants.*" (Verse 26) They form a single tree, with interlinked branches stretching wide, bearing prophethood and receiving divine revelations, stretching from the dawn of humanity at the time of Noah. When it reached the time of Abraham, it branched

out further. Thus all prophethood belonged to that main branch that has become a root in its own right.

The offspring to whom prophets and messengers were sent were not of the same type: "*Among them there are some who were rightly guided, but many who were transgressors.*" (Verse 26) Towards the end of the line, Jesus was sent with his message: "*We sent other messengers to follow in their footsteps. After these We sent Jesus, son of Mary.*" (Verse 27) He followed in the footsteps of earlier messengers from among the descendants of Noah and Abraham, making the divine message a continuous chain, with one coming after another, up to Jesus' own time.

At this point, the *sūrah* mentions a prominent characteristic of those who followed Jesus: "*We gave him the Gospel and put compassion and mercy in the hearts of those who truly follow him.*" (Verse 27) These are the natural fruits of his message that emphasizes spiritual purity. Indeed such compassion and mercy are clearly noticed among those who truly believe in Jesus' message and who properly follow him. Other verses in the Qur'ān refer to these qualities. History has given us some images of these, with reports about Negus, the ruler of Abyssinia, and the Christian delegation from Najran who came to the city of Islam willing to accept it, motivated by the truth established in their hearts, since they truly followed Jesus, son of Mary.

The *sūrah* mentions another phenomenon that prevailed among the followers of Jesus: "*As for monastic asceticism, We did not enjoin it upon them. They invented it themselves out of a desire for God's goodly acceptance.*" (Verse 27) The weightier explanation of this statement is that monastic asceticism, well known in Christian history, was a personal choice, an invention made by some of Jesus' followers who sought to win God's acceptance. Through it, they sought to steer themselves away from the burdens of this life and its many attractions. It was not something that God imposed on them in the first place. Yet when they made this choice, binding themselves to it, they were committed before God to observe its requirements such as purity, contentment, chastity, worship and piety; this so as to dedicate themselves to God's cause. However, such asceticism lost its grip on reality, and ended up as mere rituals devoid of spirituality. Many are those who make a show of it, without real substance. The fact is that only the very few are capable of rigorously

fulfilling its requirements: "*Even so, they did not observe it as it should properly be observed. So We gave those of them who truly believed their due reward, but many of them were transgressors.* (Verse 27) God does not value people by appearances and rituals; He assigns their value on the basis of their actions and intentions. He holds them to account on the basis of what they truly feel and how they actually conduct themselves. He alone knows the reality of what they harbour in their hearts.

Twice the Mercy

Now, the *sūrah* makes its final address to the believers in Islam. They are the last chain of believers in the divine message in its long history. They will continue to be the custodians of the heritage of this divine message until the Day of Judgement:

> *Believers, remain God-fearing and believe in His Messenger. He will then give you a double measure of His mercy, and will provide you with a light to walk in, and will forgive you. God is Much-Forgiving, Ever Merciful. The people of earlier revelations should know that they have no power whatever over any of God's bounty. All bounty is in God's hand: He grants it to whomever He wills. God's bounty is limitless.* (Verses 28–29)

Addressing them as '*believers*' touches their hearts tenderly. It arouses in them their sense of belief and reminds them of their duty to give their faith its due. It brings alive their bond with their Lord who addresses them by this quality that is so dear to them. It is on the basis of this bond that they are called upon to be God-fearing and to believe in His Messenger. Thus, such belief possesses a special meaning, one that reflects true faith and all its practical manifestations.

"*Believers, remain God-fearing and believe in His Messenger. He will then give you a double measure of His mercy.*" (Verse 28) This is an unusual expression speaking of a double measure of God's mercy, which is indivisible. It is enough that God's mercy should touch a person for that person to receive it in full. The wording here gives a feeling of extended mercy and kindness.

"*And will provide you with a light to walk in.*" (Verse 28) This is a reference to a divine gift which God bestows on hearts that are truly conscious of Him, fear Him, and truly believe in His Messenger. This gift makes those hearts beam with light so as to see the truth, see beyond appearances shedding the covers and barriers that try to screen it. Thus, they are not prone to confusion, nor do they follow divergent ways. They have the '*light to walk in.*' "*And will forgive you. God is Much-Forgiving, Ever Merciful.*" (Verse 28) No matter how much light a person has, he remains human: he may slip despite knowing the way. Hence, he needs God's forgiveness and mercy.

"*Believers, remain God-fearing and believe in His Messenger,*" so that you may receive a double measure of His mercy, be granted light to walk in, and benefit by God's mercy when you slip or fail in your duty. "*The people of earlier revelations should know that they have no power whatever over any of God's bounty. All bounty is in God's hand: He grants it to whomever He wills.*" (Verse 29) Peoples of earlier revelations claim that they are God's chosen people, or that they are God's sons and beloved ones. "*They say, 'Follow the Jewish faith – or, follow the Christian faith – and you shall be rightly guided.'*" (2: 135) "*They declare, 'None shall enter Paradise unless he is a Jew or a Christian.'*" (2: 111) God, therefore, calls on believers to act so that they become well deserving of His mercy, forgiveness and admittance to His heaven. In this way, those people of earlier religions will realize that they cannot monopolize God's bounty or even a measure of it. It is all in His hands, and He grants it to whomever He wills. His bounty is not reserved for any community or group, nor is it limited or scanty. Indeed, "*God's bounty is limitless.*" (Verse 29)

The *sūrah* concludes with this address to the believers that is full of encouragement to compete for the great prize of God's mercy and heaven. It is a fitting conclusion to a *sūrah* that repeatedly calls on believers to fulfil the requirements of their faith, humble themselves before God and make the necessary sacrifices of self and property, in complete dedication to Him.

In conclusion, we say that this *sūrah* is a clear example of the Qur'ānic method of addressing human hearts in a profound and effective way. In its opening, flow and conclusion, in its music, images and connotations, in its handling of its subject matter and how it develops it stage after

stage, the *sūrah* provides a highly effective lesson to advocates of the divine message. It teaches them how to address people and how to bring human nature and hearts alive. It is a lesson taught by the Maker of hearts, the author of the Qur'ān, and the Creator of everything in due measure. It is from this school that successful advocates of God's message graduate.

SŪRAH 58

Al-Mujādalah

(The Pleading)

Prologue

In this *sūrah*, as in several that follow, we are invited to witness some of the events that the first Islamic society experienced as it began to take shape in Madīnah. In this way, we see how it was moulded and prepared to undertake its role in the world. It was a huge undertaking, starting with the development of a new, complete and comprehensive concept of life that continues to serve as the basis for how the Muslim community conducts its practical affairs. That first Muslim community, however, was to present this concept to the world; it was its responsibility to establish a new foundation for life based on this concept.

That first Muslim community, which was being prepared for this great role, consisted of ordinary human beings. Its elite were the Muhājirīn and Anṣār whose concept of their new faith had matured and who now dedicated themselves to it completely. They understood the truth of their existence as part of the existence of the universe. Thus, they realized that they were part of God's will manifested in the universe. They neither deviated from it nor lagged behind in their march with it. They were, in fact, as they are described in the last verse of the *sūrah*: "*You shall not find people who truly believe in God and the Last Day on friendly terms with those who contend against God and His Messenger, even though they may be their fathers, sons, brothers, or kindred. These are the people in whose*

hearts God has inscribed faith, and whom He has strengthened with a spirit of His own. He will admit them into gardens through which running waters flow, where they will abide. Well pleased is God with them, and they with Him. They are the party of God. It is the partisans of God that will be truly successful." (Verse 22)

This elite group formed a minority in the ever-increasing numbers that swelled the Muslim community's ranks, particularly after it came to be held in awe, and this before Makkah had fallen to Islam. People flocked to the Muslim community but without having received enough Islamic education or having lived long enough in an Islamic environment. Moreover, hypocrites found their way into the Muslim community, trying to serve their own interests or avoid personal trouble. These vacillated between the Muslim community and its still powerful opponents, whether idolaters or Jews.

To educate this community in preparation for its great and important role in the world at large required strenuous effort, patience and slow but sure treatment in small and serious matters alike. All in all, it was a major social engineering project that Islam and the Prophet undertook. It sought to build individuals who could establish an Islamic society and an Islamic state based on the divine constitution. Each person had to understand this code of living, implement it and carry it to the world at large in the form of a vibrant society. It was not therefore a mere theory devoid of substance.

In this *sūrah,* and several *sūrahs* that follow, we are shown some practical examples of this great endeavour as well as some aspects of the Qur'ānic method of building the Islamic character and dealing with events, personal whims and habits. We also see some aspects of the long conflict between Islam and its opponents: Jews, idolaters and hypocrites.

This *sūrah* in particular gives us an inspiring image of the care God took of this fledgling Muslim community as He provided it with a sound education and purged its unwanted streaks, developing His presence within its consciousness. He showed the Muslim community that He was with them looking after even their most private affairs and minor events, protecting it from its enemies' schemes, whether subtle or apparent. God had placed it fully under His care and, therefore, He moulded

its morality, manners, habits and traditions. Those Muslims formed His party in human society and they carried His banner, identifying themselves as His people on earth.

Thus the *sūrah* draws right at the start a picture from that unique period of human history, characterized by direct contact between heaven and earth, and with heaven's direct involvement in the daily life of this particular group of people: "*God has heard the words of the woman who pleads with you concerning her husband, and complained to God. God has heard what you both had to say. God hears all and sees all.*" (Verse 1) What we see here is the involvement of heaven, providing judgment, in the ordinary affair of a small, poor family. God listened to the woman's argument as she pleaded with the Prophet, yet 'Ā'ishah, the Prophet's wife who was nearby, could hardly hear her. This picture fills us with the pleasure of feeling God to be near us, taking care of our concerns.

The *sūrah* then confirms that those who contend with God and His Messenger, i.e. enemies of the Muslim community, are destined to be the losers on earth and to endure humiliating suffering in the life to come. They will be punished for their evil deeds which God reckons but they forget, even though these are their own deeds: "*God is witness to all things.*" (Verse 6)

This is followed by a reminder that God is present when any group of people, three or more, engage in secret discussion, thinking that they are totally unobserved. God is with them wherever they happen to be: "*On the Day of Resurrection He will tell them the truth of what they used to do. God has full knowledge of everything.*" (Verse 7) Our feelings of God's presence are here enhanced by the realization that He is fully aware of all that takes place.

This reminder of God's presence serves as preparation for the warning issued to those who in their secret conversations conspire to harm the Muslims and cause them grief. They are warned that God sees all their scheming and records all their conspiring. He knows what they intend of sin, aggression and disobedience of God's Messenger. They are told that God will take them to account for all this. He will punish them as they deserve to be punished. The Muslims are also issued with a command not to speak in secret about anything that is in conflict with righteousness and God-consciousness.

The *sūrah* continues with its purpose of educating the Muslim community, urging the believers to adopt good and friendly manners, showing their obedience, when they attend the Prophet's circle or any circle of study or worship. It lays down some rules for discussion with the Prophet, highlighting the seriousness of such discussion.

The remainder of the *sūrah* speaks about the hypocrites who befriend the Jews and conspire with them, and who then try to conceal this with false swearing before the Prophet and the Muslim community. It depicts an image of them in the life to come when they are also quick to repeat their false oaths, trying thus to avoid God's punishment. They think that since their swearing in this world spared them the anger of the Prophet and his followers, it may spare them God's anger on the Day of Resurrection. The *sūrah* re-emphasizes that those who contend with God and His Messenger are the ones to suffer humiliation; they are the losers. This is something that God has decreed, just as He decreed that He and His messengers will prevail. This is stated in order to show the weakness of any hostile position. Yet at the time, some Muslims thought such people to be too strong and tried to maintain good relations with them. They did not realize the importance of the Muslim community having an independent stand under God's banner, and feeling safe under His care.

As the *sūrah* draws to its end, it paints a bright picture of God's party, represented at that time by the elite community of Muhājirīn and Anṣār. This is the situation that the Qur'ān wants the Muslim community to end up with.

Al-Mujādalah (The Pleading)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

God has heard the words of the woman who pleads with you concerning her husband, and complained to God. God has heard what you both had to say. God hears all and sees all. (1)

قَدْ سَمِعَ ٱللَّهُ قَوْلَ ٱلَّتِي تُجَٰدِلُكَ فِي زَوْجِهَا
وَتَشْتَكِيٓ إِلَى ٱللَّهِ وَٱللَّهُ يَسْمَعُ تَحَاوُرَكُمَآ
إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ سَمِيعٌۢ بَصِيرٌ ﴿١﴾

Even if any of you say to your wives, 'You are to me like my mother's back,' they are not your mothers; their only mothers are those who gave them birth. What they say is iniquitous and false. Yet God pardons and forgives. (2)

ٱلَّذِينَ يُظَٰهِرُونَ مِنكُم مِّن نِّسَآئِهِم
مَّا هُنَّ أُمَّهَٰتِهِمْ إِنْ أُمَّهَٰتُهُمْ إِلَّا ٱلَّٰٓـِٔي
وَلَدْنَهُمْ وَإِنَّهُمْ لَيَقُولُونَ مُنكَرًا
مِّنَ ٱلْقَوْلِ وَزُورًا وَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَعَفُوٌّ
غَفُورٌ ﴿٢﴾

Those who separate themselves from their wives by saying, 'You are as unlawful to me as my mother,' and then go back on what they have said, must atone by freeing a slave before the couple may resume their full marital relation. This is an admonition to you, and God is fully aware of all that you do. (3)

وَٱلَّذِينَ يُظَٰهِرُونَ مِن نِّسَآئِهِمْ ثُمَّ
يَعُودُونَ لِمَا قَالُوا۟ فَتَحْرِيرُ رَقَبَةٍ
مِّن قَبْلِ أَن يَتَمَآسَّا ذَٰلِكُمْ
تُوعَظُونَ بِهِۦ وَٱللَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ
خَبِيرٌ ﴿٣﴾

فَمَن لَّمْ يَجِدْ فَصِيَامُ شَهْرَيْنِ مُتَتَابِعَيْنِ
مِن قَبْلِ أَن يَتَمَاسَّا ۖ فَمَن لَّمْ يَسْتَطِعْ
فَإِطْعَامُ سِتِّينَ مِسْكِينًا ۚ ذَٰلِكَ لِتُؤْمِنُوا
بِاللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ ۚ وَتِلْكَ حُدُودُ اللَّهِ ۗ
وَلِلْكَافِرِينَ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ﴿٤﴾

However, he who does not have the means shall fast instead for two consecutive months before the couple may resume their full marital relation; and he who is unable to do it shall feed sixty needy people; this, so that you may prove your faith in God and His Messenger. Such are the bounds set by God. Grievous suffering awaits those who will not believe. (4)

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يُحَادُّونَ اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ كُبِتُوا
كَمَا كُبِتَ الَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِهِمْ ۚ وَقَدْ أَنزَلْنَا
آيَاتٍ بَيِّنَاتٍ ۚ وَلِلْكَافِرِينَ عَذَابٌ
مُّهِينٌ ﴿٥﴾

Those who contend against God and His Messenger shall be brought low as those who lived before them were brought low. We have bestowed from on high clear revelations. Shameful suffering awaits the unbelievers (5)

يَوْمَ يَبْعَثُهُمُ اللَّهُ جَمِيعًا فَيُنَبِّئُهُم
بِمَا عَمِلُوا ۚ أَحْصَاهُ اللَّهُ وَنَسُوهُ ۚ
وَاللَّهُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ شَهِيدٌ ﴿٦﴾

on the day when God will raise them all from the dead and tell them exactly all that they did in life. God will have taken it all into account, even though they may have forgotten it. God is witness to all things. (6)

أَلَمْ تَرَ أَنَّ اللَّهَ يَعْلَمُ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَمَا فِي
الْأَرْضِ ۖ مَا يَكُونُ مِن نَّجْوَىٰ
ثَلَاثَةٍ إِلَّا هُوَ رَابِعُهُمْ وَلَا خَمْسَةٍ إِلَّا هُوَ

Are you not aware that God knows all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth? Never can a secret conversation take place between three people where He is not the fourth; nor between five where He is

سَادِسُهُمْ وَلَآ أَدْنَىٰ مِن ذَٰلِكَ وَلَآ أَكْثَرَ
إِلَّا هُوَ مَعَهُمْ أَيْنَ مَا كَانُوا۟ ۖ ثُمَّ يُنَبِّئُهُم
بِمَا عَمِلُوا۟ يَوْمَ ٱلْقِيَـٰمَةِ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ بِكُلِّ شَىْءٍ
عَلِيمٌ ﴿٧﴾

not the sixth, nor between less or more than that without Him being with them, wherever they may be. On the Day of Resurrection He will tell them the truth of what they used to do. God has full knowledge of everything. (7)

أَلَمْ تَرَ إِلَى ٱلَّذِينَ نُهُوا۟ عَنِ ٱلنَّجْوَىٰ ثُمَّ
يَعُودُونَ لِمَا نُهُوا۟ عَنْهُ وَيَتَنَـٰجَوْنَ
بِٱلْإِثْمِ وَٱلْعُدْوَٰنِ وَمَعْصِيَتِ
ٱلرَّسُولِ وَإِذَا جَآءُوكَ حَيَّوْكَ بِمَا لَمْ
يُحَيِّكَ بِهِ ٱللَّهُ وَيَقُولُونَ فِىٓ
أَنفُسِهِمْ لَوْلَا يُعَذِّبُنَا ٱللَّهُ بِمَا نَقُولُ ۚ
حَسْبُهُمْ جَهَنَّمُ يَصْلَوْنَهَا ۖ فَبِئْسَ
ٱلْمَصِيرُ ﴿٨﴾

Have you not seen how those that have been forbidden to hold secret conversations still revert to what they have been forbidden? They conspire with one another with a view to sinful doings, aggressive conduct and disobedience of God's Messenger. When these people come to you they greet you with words God does not use to greet you. They say to themselves, 'Why does God not punish us for what we say?' Hell will be punishment enough for them. They will burn there. How vile a journey's end! (8)

يَـٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓا۟ إِذَا تَنَـٰجَيْتُمْ فَلَا تَتَنَـٰجَوْا۟
بِٱلْإِثْمِ وَٱلْعُدْوَٰنِ وَمَعْصِيَتِ ٱلرَّسُولِ
وَتَنَـٰجَوْا۟ بِٱلْبِرِّ وَٱلتَّقْوَىٰ ۖ وَٱتَّقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ ٱلَّذِىٓ
إِلَيْهِ تُحْشَرُونَ ﴿٩﴾

Believers, when you converse in secret, do not do so with a view to sinful doings, aggressive conduct and disobedience of God's Messenger, but rather hold counsel to promote righteousness and God-consciousness. Always remain God-fearing; to Him you will be gathered. (9)

إِنَّمَا ٱلنَّجْوَىٰ مِنَ ٱلشَّيْطَٰنِ لِيَحْزُنَ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَلَيْسَ بِضَآرِّهِمْ شَيْـًٔا إِلَّا بِإِذْنِ ٱللَّهِ ۚ وَعَلَى ٱللَّهِ فَلْيَتَوَكَّلِ ٱلْمُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿١٠﴾

[All other kinds of] secret conversation is the work of Satan, designed to cause grief to the believers. Yet he cannot harm them in the least, unless it be by God's leave. In God, then, let the believers place their trust. (10)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓا۟ إِذَا قِيلَ لَكُمْ تَفَسَّحُوا۟ فِى ٱلْمَجَٰلِسِ فَٱفْسَحُوا۟ يَفْسَحِ ٱللَّهُ لَكُمْ ۖ وَإِذَا قِيلَ ٱنشُزُوا۟ فَٱنشُزُوا۟ يَرْفَعِ ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ مِنكُمْ وَٱلَّذِينَ أُوتُوا۟ ٱلْعِلْمَ دَرَجَٰتٍ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ خَبِيرٌ ﴿١١﴾

Believers, when you are told to make room for one another in your gatherings, then do so, and God will make room for you. If you are told to rise up, then do so. God will elevate, by many degrees, those of you who believe and those who have been given knowledge. God is fully aware of all that you do. (11)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓا۟ إِذَا نَٰجَيْتُمُ ٱلرَّسُولَ فَقَدِّمُوا۟ بَيْنَ يَدَىْ نَجْوَىٰكُمْ صَدَقَةً ۚ ذَٰلِكَ خَيْرٌ لَّكُمْ وَأَطْهَرُ ۚ فَإِن لَّمْ تَجِدُوا۟ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿١٢﴾

Believers, when you wish to speak to God's Messenger in private, offer something in charity before you speak to him. That is better for you and more conducive to purity. If you do not have the means, God is Much-Forgiving, Ever Merciful. (12)

ءَأَشْفَقْتُمْ أَن تُقَدِّمُوا۟ بَيْنَ يَدَىْ نَجْوَىٰكُمْ صَدَقَٰتٍ ۚ فَإِذْ لَمْ تَفْعَلُوا۟ وَتَابَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَيْكُمْ فَأَقِيمُوا۟ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ وَءَاتُوا۟ ٱلزَّكَوٰةَ وَأَطِيعُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُۥ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ خَبِيرٌۢ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٣﴾

Do you hesitate to offer charity before you speak with the Prophet? Since you did not offer charity, and God has turned to you in His mercy, attend regularly to prayer and pay your *zakāt* [i.e. obligatory charity] and obey God and His Messenger. God is well aware of your actions. (13)

Have you not seen those who would be friends with people who have incurred God's anger? They belong neither to you nor to them. They knowingly swear to falsehood. (14)

أَلَمْ تَرَ إِلَى ٱلَّذِينَ تَوَلَّوْا۟ قَوْمًا غَضِبَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَيْهِم مَّا هُم مِّنكُمْ وَلَا مِنْهُمْ وَيَحْلِفُونَ عَلَى ٱلْكَذِبِ وَهُمْ يَعْلَمُونَ ١٤

God has prepared for them grievous suffering. Evil indeed is what they do. (15)

أَعَدَّ ٱللَّهُ لَهُمْ عَذَابًا شَدِيدًا ۖ إِنَّهُمْ سَآءَ مَا كَانُوا۟ يَعْمَلُونَ ١٥

They use their oaths as a cover [for their falseness], and they turn people away from the path of God. Hence, shameful suffering awaits them. (16)

ٱتَّخَذُوٓا۟ أَيْمَـٰنَهُمْ جُنَّةً فَصَدُّوا۟ عَن سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ فَلَهُمْ عَذَابٌ مُّهِينٌ ١٦

Neither their wealth nor their children will be of the least avail to them against God. They are destined for the fire, where they will abide. (17)

لَّن تُغْنِىَ عَنْهُمْ أَمْوَٰلُهُمْ وَلَآ أَوْلَـٰدُهُم مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ شَيْـًٔا ۚ أُو۟لَـٰٓئِكَ أَصْحَـٰبُ ٱلنَّارِ ۖ هُمْ فِيهَا خَـٰلِدُونَ ١٧

On the day when God will raise them all from the dead, they will swear before Him as they swear now before you, thinking that they have something to stand upon. It is they who are indeed liars. (18)

يَوْمَ يَبْعَثُهُمُ ٱللَّهُ جَمِيعًا فَيَحْلِفُونَ لَهُۥ كَمَا يَحْلِفُونَ لَكُمْ ۖ وَيَحْسَبُونَ أَنَّهُمْ عَلَىٰ شَىْءٍ ۚ أَلَآ إِنَّهُمْ هُمُ ٱلْكَـٰذِبُونَ ١٨

Satan has gained mastery over them and thus caused them to remain oblivious of the remembrance of God. They are the party of Satan. It is the partisans of Satan who will truly be the losers. (19)

ٱسْتَحْوَذَ عَلَيْهِمُ ٱلشَّيْطَـٰنُ فَأَنسَىٰهُمْ ذِكْرَ ٱللَّهِ ۚ أُو۟لَـٰٓئِكَ حِزْبُ ٱلشَّيْطَـٰنِ ۚ أَلَآ إِنَّ حِزْبَ ٱلشَّيْطَـٰنِ هُمُ ٱلْخَـٰسِرُونَ ١٩

Those who contend against God and His Messenger will be among the most abject. (20)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ يُحَآدُّونَ ٱللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُۥٓ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ فِي ٱلۡأَذَلِّينَ ٢٠

God has thus ordained: 'I shall most certainly prevail, I and My messengers.' God is indeed powerful, almighty. (21)

كَتَبَ ٱللَّهُ لَأَغۡلِبَنَّ أَنَا۠ وَرُسُلِيٓۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ قَوِيٌّ عَزِيزٞ ٢١

You shall not find people who truly believe in God and the Last Day on friendly terms with those who contend against God and His Messenger, even though they may be their fathers, sons, brothers, or kindred. These are the people in whose hearts God has inscribed faith, and whom He has strengthened with a spirit of His own. He will admit them into gardens through which running waters flow, where they will abide. Well pleased is God with them, and they with Him. They are the party of God. It is the partisans of God that will be truly successful. (22)

لَّا تَجِدُ قَوۡمٗا يُؤۡمِنُونَ بِٱللَّهِ وَٱلۡيَوۡمِ ٱلۡأٓخِرِ يُوَآدُّونَ مَنۡ حَآدَّ ٱللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُۥ وَلَوۡ كَانُوٓاْ ءَابَآءَهُمۡ أَوۡ أَبۡنَآءَهُمۡ أَوۡ إِخۡوَٰنَهُمۡ أَوۡ عَشِيرَتَهُمۡۚ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ كَتَبَ فِي قُلُوبِهِمُ ٱلۡإِيمَٰنَ وَأَيَّدَهُم بِرُوحٖ مِّنۡهُۖ وَيُدۡخِلُهُمۡ جَنَّٰتٖ تَجۡرِي مِن تَحۡتِهَا ٱلۡأَنۡهَٰرُ خَٰلِدِينَ فِيهَاۚ رَضِيَ ٱللَّهُ عَنۡهُمۡ وَرَضُواْ عَنۡهُۚ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ حِزۡبُ ٱللَّهِۚ أَلَآ إِنَّ حِزۡبَ ٱللَّهِ هُمُ ٱلۡمُفۡلِحُونَ ٢٢

A Personal Case in Dispute

God has heard the words of the woman who pleads with you concerning her husband, and complained to God. God has heard what you both had to say. God hears all and sees all. Even if any of you say to your wives, 'You are to me like my mother's back,' they are not your mothers;

> *their only mothers are those who gave them birth. What they say is iniquitous and false. Yet God pardons and forgives. Those who separate themselves from their wives by saying, 'You are as unlawful to me as my mother,' and then go back on what they have said, must atone by freeing a slave before the couple may resume their full marital relation. This is an admonition to you, and God is fully aware of all that you do. However, he who does not have the means shall fast instead for two consecutive months before the couple may resume their full marital relation; and he who is unable to do it shall feed sixty needy people; this, so that you may prove your faith in God and His Messenger. Such are the bounds set by God. Grievous suffering awaits those who will not believe.* (Verses 1–4)

In pre-Islamic days, a man who became angry with his wife might say to her, "You are to me like the back of my mother", and thereafter she was forbidden to him. She was not divorced however, but rather in a state of suspense. She could neither have normal marital relations with her husband nor be free to find some other arrangement for herself. This was yet another aspect of the unfair treatment of women in pre-Islamic Arabia.

These verses speak of one such event that took place before the ruling on this problem, known as *ẓihār*,[1] had been laid down. The details of the case are related in the following *ḥadīth* quoting the woman at the centre of the case, Khuwaylah bint Tha'labah:

> It was concerning me and Aws ibn al-Ṣāmit that God revealed the opening verses of the *sūrah*, The Pleading. I was married to him and he had grown old, with a quick temper. He came in one day and I questioned something he had said. He was angry as a result and said to me, 'You are to me like my mother's back'. He then went out and sat with his people for some time. He came back later and he indicated that he wanted to have sex. I said: "In no way! By Him who holds Khuwaylah's soul in His hand, you cannot approach me

1. The word *ẓihār* is derived from *ẓahr*, which means 'back', in reference to the formula used in these cases when a man would tell his wife that she was to him as unlawful as his mother's back. – Editor's note.

when you have said what you said until God and His Messenger have ruled in our case. He tried to force me, but I overpowered him in the way a woman can overpower a weak old man. I left him and went to one of my neighbours to borrow a dress from her.

I went to the Prophet and sat in front of him. I told him what had happened and complained strongly about my husband's bad manners. The Prophet said to me: "Khuwaylah! Your cousin is an old man; so be kind and God-fearing in your treatment of him." Before I left, revelations were bestowed from on high concerning me. The Prophet experienced what he usually experienced when revelations were given to him. Then he came to and said: "Khuwylah! God has revealed Qur'ānic verses concerning you and your mate." He then read to me the verses starting with "*God has heard the words of the woman who pleads with you concerning her husband, and complained to God. God has heard what you both had to say. God hears all and sees all,*" up to "*grievous suffering awaits those who will not believe.*"

The Prophet then said to me: "Tell him to free a slave." I said: "Messenger of God! He does not have the means to do so." He said: "Then let him fast two consecutive months." I said: "He is certainly an old man who cannot fast." He said: "He should then feed sixty poor people with a *wisq*[2] of dates." I said: "Messenger of God! By God, he cannot afford that." The Prophet then said: "We will help him, then, with a sack of dates." I said: "Messenger of God! I, too, will help him with another sack." The Prophet said: "That is good and kind of you. Go and give this to charity on his behalf, and take good care of your cousin." I did as the Prophet told me. [Related by Aḥmad and Abū Dāwūd.]

This, then, is the case of the woman whose argument with the Prophet God in His majesty heard and listened to. It is on the basis of this case that God pronounced His ruling from on high, giving this woman her right so that she and her husband could be free of worry. He thus showed the Muslims what to do if such a family problem occurred.

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2. A *wisq* is a measure of volume estimated to weigh about 130 kilogrammes of wheat. – Editor's note.

This is the personal situation that opens a *sūrah* of the Qur'ān, God's book, whose words are echoed by the universe as they are bestowed from on high. It opens with the statement, '*God has heard the words of the woman who pleads with you concerning her husband...*' We see here that God is present in this private case of a woman who is a mere individual in the community at large. God is not so preoccupied with conducting the affairs of the universe as not to listen to an individual's case and give His ruling on it.

It was indeed a serious matter that such an event should take place and that a community of people should feel that God was present with them as they went about their daily business. He, in His majesty, the Supreme, the Overpowering, to whom belong the heavens and the earth, responds to such ordinary problems; how compassionately overwhelming!

'Ā'ishah says: "All praise is due to God who hears all sounds. The pleading woman, Khawlah, came to the Prophet and spoke to him in a corner of my home. I could not hear what she said. Then God revealed that '*God has heard the words of the woman who pleads with you concerning her husband...*'" [Related by al-Bukhārī and al-Nasā'ī.]

As given by Khawlah – or Khuwaylah, which is a form of endearment – this report and how she went to the Prophet and argued with him, then the verdict given in the Qur'ān gives us a picture of the life of this unique community during that amazing period of history. People in that community felt their direct bond with heaven and awaited directives from on high regarding its ordinary affairs. The response was soon forthcoming, often given as people were waiting. Thus the whole community felt that they were God's dependents: He took care of them and they looked for His care just as young children expect to be cared for by their parents.

Education Through Practice

When we look at the Qur'ānic report of this case, we cannot miss that elements of education and guidance are given side by side with the verdict and the comment on it. This is the usual method of the Qur'ān, providing all that is necessary.

"*God has heard the words of the woman who pleads with you concerning her husband, and complained to God. God has heard what you both had to say. God hears all and sees all.*" (Verse 1) This is an amazing opening that says, you have not been alone; God was present, listening to you. He heard what the woman said, pleading with you and complaining to Him. He already knew the whole story and was fully aware of what discussion had taken place. He hears all and sees all. In this highly inspiring way the Qur'ān presents all that occurred but without the involvement of a third party.

The *sūrah* then states the principle that governs such cases: "*Even if any of you say to your wives, 'You are to me like my mother's back,' they are not your mothers; their only mothers are those who gave them birth. What they say is iniquitous and false. Yet God pardons and forgives.*" (Verse 2) This deals with the case in its entirety. *Ẓihār* does not rely on any solid basis. A wife is not a mother so as to become forbidden like one. Somebody's mother is the woman that gave birth to that person. A wife cannot become a mother at the utterance of a word or a few words. Such a statement lacks all substance, it is utter nonsense. In life, all relations should be based on what is true, clear and solid so as to prevent any muddle or confusion. "*Yet God pardons and forgives*" what has passed of such incidents.

Having laid down the principle so clearly, the verdict is stated in detail: "*Those who separate themselves from their wives by saying, 'You are as unlawful to me as my mother,' and then go back on what they have said, must atone by freeing a slave before the couple may resume their full marital relation. This is an admonition to you, and God is fully aware of all that you do.*" (Verse 3) God has made freeing a slave a way of atonement for various offences. This is one way Islam freed those who had fallen into slavery in consequence of the system prevalent at the time, which allowed for the enslavement of prisoners of war. Various views have been stated with regard to the phrase, "*then go back on what they have said.*" We choose the view that says that they resume marital relations which they had earlier forbidden themselves by *ẓihār*. The freeing of a slave should occur before it becomes permissible for them to so go back. A comment is added here: "*This is an admonition to you.*" (Verse 3) The atonement required is an admonition and a warning against reverting

to this totally unacceptable practice. "*God is fully aware of all that you do.*" (Verse 3) He knows its nature, how it happens and your intention in doing it.

This comment is given before the verdict is completed. It serves to keep hearts alert and to strengthen discipline, reminding people of God's authority and His knowledge of whatever is apparent or concealed. The *sūrah* then states: "*However, he who does not have the means shall fast instead for two consecutive months before the couple may resume their full marital relation; and he who is unable to do it shall feed sixty needy people.*" (Verse 4) This is followed by a comment and a directive: "*This, so that you may prove your faith in God and His Messenger.*" (Verse 4) These people were indeed believers. However, this clarification and these penalties provide a direct link between their affairs and God's order. This makes belief operative in ordinary life, giving faith real authority in society. "*Such are the bounds set by God.*" (Verse 4) He has set these bounds so that people will not transgress them. He is also angry with those who do not observe these bounds. "*Grievous suffering awaits those who will not believe,*" because of their transgression, lack of faith and going beyond the limits He has defined.

In Contention Against God

The last sentence in the verse, '*Grievous suffering awaits those who will not believe,*' is certainly a fitting ending as it completes the discussion of the woman's situation, while also providing a bridge to the theme of the next verse that speaks about those who contend against God and His Messenger. This is characteristic of the superb Qur'ānic method as it smoothly moves from one theme to another:

> *Those who contend against God and His Messenger shall be brought low as those who lived before them were brought low. We have bestowed from on high clear revelations. Shameful suffering awaits the unbelievers on the day when God will raise them all from the dead and tell them exactly all that they did in life. God will have taken it all into account, even though they may have forgotten it. God is witness to all things.* (Verses 5–6)

The opening passage of the *sūrah* provided an aspect of the care shown to the Muslim community, while this second passage provides an aspect of antagonism to the opposite group who contend against God and His Messenger. The Arabic term, *yuḥāddūn*, translated here as 'contend' is derived from the same root as the word used earlier, *ḥudūd*, which means 'boundaries'. Thus, this group are defined as taking a stand at the other boundary, confronting God and His Messenger. This gives an image of two parties in contention and confrontation. As such, it serves to show their action in a very bad light. How miserable for a creature to be in open hostility to his Creator when it is He who provides him with sustenance.

These people who are in contention "*shall be brought low as those who lived before them were brought low.*" The way this sentence is phrased in Arabic may be understood as a prayer against them. A prayer by God is a sentence of judgement that makes it inevitable since it is He who pronounces this sentence, and His will is always done. The phrase, '*those who lived before them,*' refers either to earlier communities who were punished by God, or to the then unbelievers who suffered humiliating defeats at the hands of the Muslims prior to the revelation of this *sūrah*, as happened, for example, at the Battle of Badr.

"*We have bestowed from on high clear revelations.*" This sentence separates the two fates suffered by the unbelievers in this life and in the life to come, in order to point out that both fates are clearly stated in these verses. It also tells us that these unbelievers do not face these fates as a result of ignorance or any ambiguity in the truth. Indeed, the truth has been put to them clearly and lucidly in these revelations, which they too have been given.

As the *sūrah* refers to their fate in the hereafter, it adds an inspiring comment that serves an educational purpose: "*Shameful suffering awaits the unbelievers on the day when God will raise them all from the dead and tell them exactly all that they did in life. God will have taken it all into account, even though they may have forgotten it. God is witness to all things.* (Verses 5–6) They are made to suffer shame in punishment for their arrogance. This shameful suffering will take place on the day when all will be resurrected. Thus, it will be seen by all. Besides, the suffering is determined on the basis of a true account of their deeds. If they have

forgotten these, God has recorded them all, as nothing escapes His knowledge: "*God is witness to all things.*"

The opposite cases of care and antagonism take place in God's presence and with His knowledge. He witnesses the help and care granted to the believers as well as the hostility shown to the other group. The believers should be reassured by His presence, while the unbelievers should take heed.

Whispers and Conspiracies

The *sūrah* then portrays God's presence in an inspiring image that leaves a telling effect on our hearts:

> *Are you not aware that God knows all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth? Never can a secret conversation take place between three people where He is not the fourth; nor between five where He is not the sixth, nor between less or more than that without Him being with them, wherever they may be. On the Day of Resurrection He will tell them the truth of what they used to do. God has full knowledge of everything.* (Verse 7)

The verse begins by stating God's knowledge that takes in everything in the heavens and earth. Our imagination is left to roam across the wide horizons and the remote corners of the earth, drawing a picture of this knowledge that leaves out nothing large or small, apparent or hidden, in this vast universe. It then draws gradually closer touching its addressees' hearts, presenting an image of God's knowledge that shakes them strongly: "*Never can a secret conversation take place between three people where He is not the fourth; nor between five where He is not the sixth, nor between less or more than that without Him being with them, wherever they may be.*" (Verse 7)

This is a true statement, but it is expressed in a profoundly effective way. It leaves our hearts with two contrasting feelings, trembling with awe on the one hand and reassured on the other as we amazedly feel the friendly presence of the Almighty. Thus, wherever three people meet in secret they feel that God is their fourth, and if they are five, they

realize that He is their sixth. Indeed, wherever two people whisper in secret, God is with them as He is with any larger group. Whenever we contemplate this image we are overwhelmed with awe. It is true that God's presence gives us a feeling of friendly reassurance, but it is at the same time very awesome. It is the Almighty who is present "*wherever they may be.*"

"*On the Day of Resurrection He will tell them the truth of what they used to do.*" (Verse 7) This statement sends a shudder of fear into people's hearts. The mere presence of God and His hearing of all conversations is ominous. Now they look at the consequences of this presence in the form of punishment. What happens when that which people say in secret is publicized in the presence of all on the Day of Resurrection, when all mankind of all generations are witnesses!

The verse ends in the same way as it started, giving a general image: "*God has full knowledge of everything.*" (Verse 7) Thus the notion of God's full and comprehensive knowledge, which is stated in various ways in this verse, is driven home to everyone. This inevitably leaves a profound effect on our hearts and minds.

This awesome picture of God's knowledge serves as an introduction to a warning issued to the hypocrites who held secret conversations, conspiring against the Prophet and the Muslim community in Madīnah:

> *Have you not seen how those that have been forbidden to hold secret conversations still revert to what they have been forbidden? They conspire with one another with a view to sinful doings, aggressive conduct and disobedience of God's Messenger. When these people come to you they greet you with words God does not use to greet you. They say to themselves, 'Why does God not punish us for what we say?' Hell will be punishment enough for them. They will burn there. How vile a journey's end!* (Verse 8)

The verse suggests that the Prophet's initial policy in dealing with the hypocrites was to advise them to be clear and sincere in their attitude, and to stop conspiring with the Jews against Islam. Yet still they persisted in their deviant ways, scheming against the Muslim community, trying in every way possible to disobey the Prophet and cause disruption.

The verse also suggests that some of them used to offer their greeting to the Prophet in a twisted way, giving it a bad meaning: "*When these people come to you they greet you with words God does not use to greet you.*" (Verse 8) They might have used the same means as the Jews did when they pronounced the greeting *assalām 'alaikum*, which means 'peace be to you', as, *assām 'alaikum*, which means 'death to you'. They might have used some other way that appeared innocent but which nonetheless concealed an ill wish. They even thought that had Muḥammad been truly a prophet, then God would have punished them for what they said by way of greeting or in their whispers and secret conversations.

It is clear from the way the *sūrah* opens then unfolds that God had told the Prophet of what they said and schemed. The *sūrah* began with the announcement that God heard the woman pleading with the Prophet, and then it stated that God is witness with any group, large or small. All this suggests that He informed the Prophet of the hypocrites' schemes and the thoughts they harboured.

An answer is given to their ill-conceived thoughts: "*Hell will be punishment enough for them. They will burn there. How vile a journey's end!*" (Verse 8)

What to Say in Secret

The *sūrah* then addresses the believers by their very quality of having accepted the faith. It tells them that they must not indulge in the sort of secret whispers the hypocrites resorted to, encouraging each other to commit sin, aggression and disobedience of the Prophet. It reminds them to remain God-fearing and tells them that such whispers as the hypocrites engage in is inspired by Satan who aims to cause grief to the believers. Hence, it is totally unbecoming of those who have faith:

> *Believers, when you converse in secret, do not do so with a view to sinful doings, aggressive conduct and disobedience of God's Messenger, but rather hold counsel to promote righteousness and God-consciousness. Always remain God-fearing; to Him you will be gathered. [All other kinds of] secret conversation is the work of Satan, designed to cause grief to the believers. Yet he cannot harm them in the least, unless it*

be by God's leave. In God, then, let the believers place their trust. (Verses 9–10)

It seems that some in the Muslim community had not fully absorbed the sense of Islamic discipline. Such people met when times were hard to consult among themselves, and this was unknown to their leadership. This is something contrary to the nature of the Muslim community and the spirit of Islamic discipline, which together require that every view or suggestion first be presented to the leadership, not to fringe groups. It also appears that some of these fringe groups might have stirred up trouble that could have had negative effects on the Muslim community. These people may also not have had any intention of causing harm or difficulty for the Muslim community, but by raising certain subjects and discussing them without having a full picture of the matter this could cause such harm.

The *sūrah* addresses them as believers, using their quality that establishes their bond with God. This makes the address especially effective. It tells them that should they converse in private, then their conversation must not involve anything that connotes sin, aggressive conduct or disobedience of the Prophet. The only subjects that are fitting for believers are those that '*promote righteousness and God-consciousness,*' with the aim of facilitating them and bringing about their results, which are always good. The *sūrah* reminds them that they should remain God-fearing, for they will certainly be gathered to Him and He will hold them to account for their deeds; these He knows no matter how hard they try to conceal them.

A man stopped 'Abdullāh ibn 'Umar as he was walking with a friend and asked him: "'What did you hear the Prophet say about secret conversations on the Day of Judgement?' He answered: 'I heard the Prophet when he said that God will bring a believer close to Him and shield him with His cover, so that he will not be seen by others. He will ask him about his sins, naming them one after one. When the man has acknowledged all his sins and feels that he will be doomed, God will say to him: 'I have kept these sins secret for you during your life on earth; now I forgive you them.' He will then be given the record of his good deeds. As for the unbelievers and the hypocrites, the witnesses

will point to them and say: 'These are the ones who have lied about their Lord. God's curse befalls the wrongdoers.'" [Related by Aḥmad, al-Bukhārī and Muslim.]

In this way, such people are put off secret conversations and side whispers unknown to the Muslim community to which they belong and whose interests are the same as their own. In other words, they must not think themselves separate from the Muslim community in any way. The *sūrah* tells them that when other Muslims see such side whispering and secret conversations, they are hurt by them. They feel apprehensive, concerned that a lack of trust has crept into the community. Satan always tries to tempt whisperers to go further in order to cause worry and grief to others. However, the *sūrah* reassures the believers that Satan will not achieve his purpose: "*Secret conversation is the work of Satan, designed to cause grief to the believers. Yet he cannot harm them in the least, unless it be by God's leave. In God, then, let the believers place their trust.* (Verse 10) Believers place their trust in God and in no one else.

The Prophet repeatedly advised against secret conversations whenever such talk caused doubt, anxiety and apprehension. He is quoted by Ibn Mas'ūd as saying: "When there are only three of you, let there be no discussion between two of them to the exclusion of the third, for this is bound to grieve him." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.]

This is an aspect of fine manners, and a wise precaution against what causes suspicion. Sometimes, however, there is need for a private discussion in order to keep a secret, or to avoid a scandal. This is acceptable and it normally takes place among community leaders. It must never, however, be through a side group with the rest of the community unaware of what is going on. Such a practice is divisive and leads to friction and grief, which is Satan's aim. God's promise is definitive. Satan will not achieve his purpose by such means, because God will protect the Muslim community. He is fully aware of every secret conversation, every conspiracy against the Muslim community. Satan can never harm the believers "*unless it be by God's leave.*" (Verse 10) This exception is added to emphasize that God's will is absolute and free of restriction in any situation to which His promise applies.

"*In God, then, let the believers place their trust.*" (Verse 10) He is the Guardian who protects the believers. He is the Almighty who knows all,

the Witness to all things. Nothing in the universe escapes His knowledge. Nothing occurs unless it be by His will. He has promised to protect the believers. Could there by anything more reassuring?

Refined Manners

The believers are encouraged to maintain another aspect of good behaviour and fine manners:

> *Believers, when you are told to make room for one another in your gatherings, then do so, and God will make room for you. If you are told to rise up, then do so. God will elevate, by many degrees, those of you who believe and those who have been given knowledge. God is fully aware of all that you do.* (Verse 11)

Reports speaking about the revelation of this verse suggest that it actually related to the hypocrites, which makes it more relevant to the flow of the *sūrah*. Qatādah mentions that this verse speaks about gatherings for voluntary worship. When those who were already sitting with the Prophet saw someone coming to join them, they were obviously keen to retain their own positions close to the Prophet. Here, God orders them to make room for each other.

Muqātil ibn Ḥayyān reports:

> This verse was revealed on a Friday, when the Prophet was at al-Ṣuffah where the place was rather narrow. He used to honour those who attended the Battle of Badr from among the Muhājirīn and the Anṣār. Some people who fought at Badr came to join him but the place was already taken up. They stood facing the Prophet and greeted him. He replied to their greeting. Then they greeted the people sitting with the Prophet and those replied. They continued to stand, hoping that those present would make room for them. The Prophet realized why they remained standing and that nobody had made room for them. He was displeased. Therefore, he said to some of those from the Muhājirīn and the Anṣār who did not take part in Badr to stand up, choosing them by name. He asked to stand up as many as there were standing. Those who were thus asked to

> stand felt this to be hard. The Prophet noticed that they looked upset. Some hypocrites exploited this, saying to the believers: 'Do you not say that your man is fair to all people? We certainly saw him being unfair to these. Here were some people who had already sat in their places, eager to be close to their Prophet, yet he asked them to stand up, giving their places to ones who came late...' The Prophet is reported to have said a prayer: 'May God have mercy on one who makes room for his brother.' After that, people used to quickly rise in order to make room for their brothers.

If this report is authentic, it should be understood as not being in conflict with other *aḥādīth* that forbid someone to ask his brother to stand up so as to sit in his place, such as that which says: "Let no man make another rise from his position so as to sit in his place. Rather, move closer and make room for others." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] Other instructions by the Prophet make it clear that a person who is joining a sitting group should sit at the end. He must not walk over people's shoulders so as to be in front. The Qur'ānic verse urges those who are sitting to make room for those joining them. It also urges obedience, requiring the one who is seated to rise if he is asked to do so. This order, however, is given by the leader responsible for organizing the group, not by the newcomer.

The purpose behind all this is to instil into people the feeling of welcome towards the newcomer before actually making room for him to sit. When that feeling is genuine, people are pleased to see others joining them, and those seated receive the newcomers warmly, willingly making room for them. However, if the person in charge thinks that a particular place should be given to a newcomer for a special reason, his instructions should be readily and happily complied with, observing at the same time the overall rules of not walking over people's shoulders or making one person stand to let another sit in his place. It should all be done with mutual tolerance.

Again we note the Qur'ānic method of making people willing to comply with every instruction. The *sūrah* promises those who make room for others that God will make good room for them: "*Believers, when you are told to make room for one another in your gatherings, then*

do so, and God will make room for you." (Verse 11) It also promises those who were instructed to leave their place so as to give it to others that they will enjoy an elevated position with God: "*If you are told to rise up, then do so. God will elevate, by many degrees, those of you who believe and those who have been given knowledge.*" (Verse 11) This, in recompense for their obedience and accommodating attitude.

The occasion was one of being close to the Prophet in order to learn from him. The *sūrah* teaches believers that good faith, which makes people accommodating and obedient, and knowledge, which refines hearts and manners, will ensure a higher position with God. This as a reward for willingly vacating a position close to the Prophet, obeying his order given for a particular purpose he had in mind: "*God is fully aware of all that you do.*" (Verse 11) He rewards people according to what He knows of their feelings and intentions.

This is yet another example of the Qur'ānic method of educating Muslims, teaching them to be kindly, accommodating and helpful by bringing out their better feelings. Religion does not work by giving firm instructions that must be literally obeyed; rather, it relies on changing people's feelings and sensitivities.

The Qur'ān also teaches them to refine their manners when dealing with the Prophet. It appears that people were eager to talk to the Prophet privately, each seeking his advice concerning his own private matter, or merely to have the pleasure of being alone with him. People did not seem to appreciate the demands on the Prophet's time, with all his social and public responsibilities, or they did not realize that a matter for which they wanted a private conference with the Prophet must be a serious one. Therefore, God wanted them to understand that it was necessary to impose a tax, for the benefit of the community, to be paid by the person who wanted the Prophet to attend to his personal problem because he was taking up some of the Prophet's time which was devoted to the community. This tax took the form of a charity which should be paid before attending the Prophet:

> *Believers, when you wish to speak to God's Messenger in private, offer something in charity before you speak to him. That is better for you and more conducive to purity. If you do not have the means, God is Much-Forgiving, Ever Merciful.* (Verse 12)

'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib was the one who acted on the instructions given in this verse. According to reports, he set aside a number of dirhams, i.e. the silver currency of the time. Whenever he wanted to speak alone to the Prophet he gave one dirham in charity. This requirement was nonetheless difficult for the Muslims, as they were generally poor. The instruction, however, fulfilled its purpose, making them aware of the value of a private conference with the Prophet. God lightened their burden, revealing the next verse which abrogated the requirement of paying to charity before such a conference took place. The verse also directed the Muslims to attend better to their various aspects of worship:

> *Do you hesitate to offer charity before you speak with the Prophet? Since you did not offer charity, and God has turned to you in His mercy, attend regularly to prayer and pay your* zakāt *[i.e. obligatory charity] and obey God and His Messenger. God is well aware of your actions.* (Verse 13)

These two verses and the reports we have about the occasions in which they were revealed provide an aspect of the educational efforts that aimed to cultivate the manners and social approach of the Muslim community, even in matters of detail that were not particularly serious.

False Swearing

The *sūrah* speaks anew about the hypocrites who befriended the Jews in Madīnah, describing their true position and attitude. It threatens to expose their hypocrisy and to inflict a terrible end upon them. It makes clear that Islam will be triumphant, despite all their schemes and conspiracies:

> *Have you not seen those who would be friends with people who have incurred God's anger? They belong neither to you nor to them. They knowingly swear to falsehood. God has prepared for them grievous suffering. Evil indeed is what they do. They use their oaths as a cover [for their falseness], and they turn people away from the path of God. Hence, shameful suffering awaits them. Neither their wealth nor their children will be of the least avail to them against God. They are destined*

> *for the fire, where they will abide. On the day when God will raise them all from the dead, they will swear before Him as they swear now before you, thinking that they have something to stand upon. It is they who are indeed liars. Satan has gained mastery over them and thus caused them to remain oblivious of the remembrance of God. They are the party of Satan. It is the partisans of Satan who will truly be the losers.* (Verses 14–19)

This strong denunciation of the hypocrites who befriended those who had incurred God's anger, i.e. the Jews, suggests that these hypocrites were very active in scheming against the Muslim community, conspiring with its avowed enemies. It also suggests that the authority of Islam had now been consolidated so as to strike fear into the hypocrites' hearts. Thus, when the Prophet and the believers confronted them with what God might have exposed of their scheming, they resorted to swearing falsely, denying what was attributed to them, knowing, however, that they lied as they swore. They hoped that by thus forswearing they would spare themselves any punishment for scheming against the Muslim community: "*They use their oaths as a cover [for their falseness], and they turn people away from the path of God.*" (Verse 16)

Repeated warnings are issued to them in this passage: "*God has prepared for them grievous suffering. Evil indeed is what they do.*" (Verse 15) "*Hence, shameful suffering awaits them. Neither their wealth nor their children will be of the least avail to them against God. They are destined for the fire, where they will abide.*" (Verses 16–17) The *sūrah* describes their abject and miserable position on the Day of Judgement when they will swear to God as they used to swear to people: "*On the day when God will raise them all from the dead, they will swear before Him as they swear now before you.*" This description suggests that hypocrisy had become so entrenched in their hearts that it would remain with them on the Day of Judgement, in the presence of God who knows people's deepest secrets and innermost thoughts: "*Thinking that they have something to stand upon,*" when they actually stand on nothing, not even thin air.

The *sūrah* brands them as confirmed liars: "*It is they who are indeed liars.*" (Verse 18) It then explains the cause of their condition: "*Satan has gained mastery over them and thus caused them to remain oblivious of the*

remembrance of God." (Verse 19) A heart that forgets to remember God becomes corrupt and given to evil: "*They are the party of Satan.*" (Verse 19) They stand under his banner, act in his name, obey his instructions, work for his objectives. This situation of unmitigated evil ends in total loss: "*It is the partisans of Satan who will truly be the losers.*" (Verse 19)

Such a strong denunciation certainly fits the evil and the harm those hypocrites intended towards the Muslim community. It also reassures the Muslims that God is with them, exposing their hidden enemies.

Such hypocrites were intimate with the Jews, thinking that they were a power to be reckoned with. Hence they always sought their help and advice. Therefore, God makes it clear to them that His enemies will always suffer defeat and humiliation, while His cause and His messengers will be victorious:

> *Those who contend against God and His Messenger will be among the most abject. God has thus ordained: 'I shall most certainly prevail, I and My messengers.' God is indeed powerful, almighty.* (Verses 20–21)

This is indeed a true promise made by God: it came true in the past and will always come true, despite appearances that may suggest that it will not be so fulfilled. What actually happened was that the message of God's oneness overpowered unbelief and idolatry. The Islamic faith was well established on earth and humanity accepted its supremacy after a long struggle against unbelief, polytheism and atheism that ended in the total defeat of these evil forces. There were periods in which atheism or polytheism managed to gain power in certain areas, as happens today with some states that are openly atheist or polytheistic, yet belief in God generally remains dominant in the world. Besides, atheism and polytheism will always be short lived, because they are not fit to survive.[3] Humanity discovers every day new evidence guiding it to believe in God and to the consolidation of faith and belief in His oneness.

A believer treats a promise by God as a confirmed and undoubted fact. Should what be on the ground at any time or place be contrary to this, then that which is on the ground is false and transitory. It occurs on

3. Future events, viz. the collapse of Communism, confirmed the author's view. He wrote this in the early 1960s when Communism was in its heyday. – Editor's note.

earth for a limited period and for a purpose only God knows. It may be there to awaken faith in people's hearts, so that it takes over and God's promise is fulfilled at its appointed time.

When we look today at the determined onslaught against the people of faith, in its numerous forms of suppression, pressure and scheming, we remember God's true promise. The onslaught has been so ferocious that large numbers of believers have been killed, tortured, left destitute and deprived of their livelihoods. Yet faith remained firm in believers' hearts, protecting them from yielding and protecting their communities from loss of identity and annihilation by attacking forces. It has also saved these communities from submitting to tyranny except for short periods during which they rallied their forces to defeat such oppression. When we look at this across the generations we realize that God's promise will undoubtedly come true. We find this now in the present situation without need to wait for long.

Anyhow, a believer will never entertain any doubt that God's promise is the truth and that this will certainly take place. Those who contend against God and His Messenger will be the most abject of people, for God and His messengers will triumph. A believer is absolutely certain that all this is inevitable, that it will be done, regardless of appearances to the contrary.

The Measure of Faith

As the *sūrah* draws to its close, it outlines the constant rule that believers apply, or the accurate measure of faith as it settles in people's hearts:

> *You shall not find people who truly believe in God and the Last Day on friendly terms with those who contend against God and His Messenger, even though they may be their fathers, sons, brothers, or kindred. These are the people in whose hearts God has inscribed faith, and whom He has strengthened with a spirit of His own. He will admit them into gardens through which running waters flow, where they will abide. Well pleased is God with them, and they with Him. They are the party of God. It is the partisans of God that will be truly successful.* (Verse 22)

This provides complete comparison between God's party and the party of Satan. It is a question of taking one's final and unhesitating position with the party of distinction, after discarding all burdens and temptations, so as to uphold the one and only tie. "*You shall not find people who truly believe in God and the Last Day on friendly terms with those who contend against God and His Messenger.*" (Verse 22) Never has God put two hearts in one man's body. Never can anyone harbour two loves in his heart: one love for God and His Messenger and one for their enemies. It is all a question of faith or unfaith; the two can never meet.

"*Even though they may be their fathers, sons, brothers, or kindred.*" (Verse 22) All bonds of kinship and blood relations are severed when they come into conflict with faith. These bonds may however be maintained and respected if there is no contention or dispute between the two camps. The Qur'ān instructs believers to maintain good relations with parents if they are unbelievers, provided that there is no war going on between God's party and Satan's party. Should there be contention, war and conflict, these bonds are to be totally severed. Abū 'Ubaydah killed his father during the Battle of Badr; Abū Bakr wanted to kill his son 'Abd al-Raḥmān; Muṣ'ab ibn 'Umayr killed his brother 'Ubayd ibn 'Umayr; and 'Umar, Ḥamzah, 'Alī and 'Ubaydah ibn al-Ḥārith all killed their relatives. All discarded ties of blood and kinship, opting for the bond of faith. This was the best implementation of the standard of bonds and values as classified in God's measure.

"*These are the people in whose hearts God has inscribed faith.*" (Verse 22) Faith is confirmed in their hearts by God's hand, written in their breasts by His right hand. It cannot be erased or be subject to ambiguity or confusion. "*And whom He has strengthened with a spirit of His own.*" (Verse 22) They cannot achieve such resolve without the support of a spirit of His own making. Their hearts cannot beam so brightly without the light that emanates from this spirit, gives them strength and binds them to the only true source of strength and light.

"*He will admit them into gardens through which running waters flow, where they will abide.*" (Verse 22) This is their reward for abandoning every tie and bond, and discarding all desire for worldly temptation. "*Well pleased is God with them, and they with Him.*" (Verse 22) This is a pleasant picture that radiates contentment and reassurance. It shows

us the situation of these believers in their lofty position and pleasant surroundings. They bask in their feeling of mutual pleasure with their Lord. They maintain their links with Him and discard all others. He then accepts them, admits them to His presence and makes it clear to them that He is pleased with them. They are gratified by this closeness to Him.

"*They are the party of God.*" They rank under His banner, move under His leadership, follow His guidance, implement His code of living, and do on earth what He has willed, as they are part of His will. "*It is the partisans of God that will be truly successful.*" (Verse 22) Who will be successful if God's partisans are not?

Thus humanity is split into two groups: God's party and Satan's party, raising two banners: the banner of the truth and the banner of falsehood. Every person must choose to either belong to God's party and support the truth or to side with Satan, standing under the banner of falsehood. The two parties are clearly separated. They can neither meet nor mix.

There is no room for ties of kinship, marriage, clan, community, country, race or nation. The only admissible tie is that of faith. Whoever chooses it will find that all those who stand under its banner maintain a tie of brotherhood. They might belong to different races, colours, countries, tribes and families, but they all share in the tie that forms God's party. Thus all differences between them disappear. Anyone who stands under the banner of falsehood will not enjoy a tie or bond with any among God's party. The main tie, to which all other ties are secondary, has been severed, so all ties are severed.

This verse suggests that there were some people within the Muslim community who still felt the strength of ties of blood, kindred and friendship. It thus seeks to put things very clearly. It also shows that others in the ranks of the Muslim community had managed to achieve the required standard, discarding all bonds other than that of faith.

This picture provides the finest possible ending to this *sūrah*. It started by portraying the care God takes of His community of believers, outlining the case of a poor woman who pleaded with the Prophet about her husband, stating that God listened to her concerns. With such care granted by God, placing the tie with Him above all else is the natural response. Opting for God's party is the only course acceptable from the community God has chosen to fulfil the role He has assigned to it.

SŪRAH 59

Al-Ḥashr
(The Gathering)

Prologue

This *sūrah* was revealed shortly after the Muslims' encounter with the Jewish tribe of al-Naḍīr, which took place early in the fourth year following the Prophet's migration to Madīnah. It describes how the event occurred and why, and what regulations were put in place in the Muslim community once it was over. All this is reported in the unique style of the Qur'ān. Comments are added so as to educate the Muslim community and refine its attitudes, and the events themselves are used to highlight certain aspects and to give directives.

Before we discuss the *sūrah* in detail, we will look at some of the reports concerning the encounter that provided the occasion for its revelation. This will enable us to appreciate how the Qur'ān presents the story, firstly summing up its details and then looking far beyond these particular events to a much broader purpose.

These events took place after the Battle of Uḥud but before the Battle of the Moat. The Prophet along with ten leading figures from among his Companions, including Abū Bakr, 'Umar and 'Alī, had gone to the al-Naḍīr's quarters to request them to contribute to the blood money the Muslims had to pay for the accidental killing of two innocent men by 'Amr ibn Umayyah, one of the Prophet's Companions. The Prophet asked for their help on the basis of the covenant signed between the

Muslim community and the Jews of Madīnah soon after the Prophet's settlement there. The elders of al-Naḍīr received the Prophet well and asked him to wait while they raised the money. In actual fact, it occurred to them that this was their opportunity to assassinate the Prophet as he sat against the wall of one of their homes. Some of them said: "You will never find the man as easy prey as he is now. Let a strong person go onto the roof of the house next to which Muḥammad is sitting and drop a large stone or rock over his head and rid us of him." One of them, 'Amr ibn Jiḥāsh ibn Ka'b, volunteered to commit this treacherous crime, and went on to the roof of the house to throw such a stone on the Prophet's head. The Prophet, however, had been informed by God of the al-Naḍīr's design and so he had left his Companions where they were; giving the impression that he would shortly return. Instead, he had gone straight back to Madīnah. When the Prophet's Companions who were with him felt that he had been absent for too long, they started to worry and went looking for him. Soon they met a man on his way from Madīnah who told them that he had seen the Prophet entering the city.

In Madīnah, the Prophet had ordered his Companions to ready themselves to fight the al-Naḍīr because of their treachery, breaching the treaty between the two parties. Prior to that, one of their leading figures, Ka'b ibn al-Ashraf, had gone too far in abusing the Prophet and raising enemies against the Muslims. It had been reported to the Prophet that Ka'b ibn al-Ashraf and others from al-Naḍīr were in contact with the Quraysh aiming to forge an alliance with them so as to undermine the Muslim community; this despite the treaty they had with the Prophet. Hence why the Prophet gave Muḥammad ibn Maslamah permission to assassinate Ka'b ibn al-Ashraf, which he did.

As the Jews of al-Naḍīr tribe took treacherous steps against the Prophet and the Muslim community, it was necessary to revoke the treaty with them, in accordance with the Islamic rule that says: "*If you fear treachery from any folk, cast [your treaty with them] back to them in a fair manner. God does not love the treacherous.*" (8: 58)

When the Prophet and his Companions were ready, they laid siege to the al-Naḍīr in their quarters, giving them three days' notice to vacate and leave their homes. Some reports suggest that the notice gave them ten days. They were allowed to take all their possessions with them

and to appoint agents to manage their fields and farms on their behalf. However, the hypocrites in Madīnah, led by 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy ibn Salūl, sent word to them encouraging them to resist and pledging their support. They assured them that they would fight alongside them, and should they be made to leave, they promised to leave with them. It is in reference to these assurances that the *sūrah* says: "*Are you not aware of those hypocrites who say to their brethren who disbelieve among the people of earlier revelations, 'If you are driven out, we shall most certainly go with you, and shall never pay heed to anyone against you; and if you are attacked, we shall most certainly come to your aid'? God bears witness that they are indeed liars. If they are driven out, they will not go with them; and if they are attacked, they will not help them. Even if they come to their aid, they will most certainly turn their backs in flight; and in the end they will have no help. You, [believers,] arouse in their hearts a fear more intense than their fear of God, because they are devoid of understanding.*" (Verses 11–13)

The al-Naḍīr withdrew to their forts. The Prophet ordered that their palm trees should be cut and burnt. They called out to him, saying: 'Muḥammad! You have always criticized those who destroy places and lay land to waste. How come that you are now felling palm trees and burning them?' In reply, the *sūrah* states: "*Whatever of their palm trees you [believers] may have cut down or left standing on their roots, it was done by God's leave, so that He might disgrace the transgressors.*" (Verse 5)

After 26 nights of siege, the al-Naḍīr despaired that the promises of their hypocrite friends would ever come true. God had cast terror in their hearts. They sent to the Prophet requesting him to allow them to leave on the same terms as the Qaynuqā' Jews who had earlier been evacuated.[1] This would afford them safe conduct and they would be allowed to take what their camels could carry of their possessions, except their arms. The Prophet accepted this. Thus, they loaded their camels with their possessions. They also destroyed their own homes so that these would not be taken over by Muslims. During the siege, the Muslims had destroyed some of the walls of their fortifications. In reference to this, the *sūrah* says: "*It is He who drove the unbelievers among the people*

1. The details of that evacuation are given in our commentary on *Sūrah* 33, Volume XIV, pp. 52–54.

of earlier revelations out of their homes at the first gathering. You never thought they would go; while they thought that their fortifications would protect them against God. God came upon them from where they had not expected, casting terror into their hearts. Thus, they destroyed their homes by their own hands, as well as the hands of the believers. Learn from their example, you who are endowed with insight. Had it not been for God's having decreed exile for them, He would surely have inflicted [greater] suffering on them in this world. In the life to come they will still endure suffering through the fire because they have defied God and His Messenger. Whoever defies God – well, God is severe in retribution." (Verses 2–4)

Some of the al-Naḍīr went to Khaybar, others headed for Syria. Among their leading figures who headed for Khaybar were Sallām ibn Mishkam ibn Abū al-Ḥuqayq, his cousin Kinānah ibn al-Rabī' ibn Abī al-Ḥuqayq and Ḥuyayy ibn Akhṭab to whom reference is made in *Sūrah* 33; these managed to raise an alliance against the Muslim community, leading to the Battle of the Moat. Some of them are also referred to in *Sūrah* 48, in connection with the Battle of Khaybar.

The property left behind by the al-Naḍīr tribe was a free gain for the Prophet. The Muslims had not had to spur a horse or a camel in order to achieve that gain. Therefore, it belonged purely to God and His Messenger. The Prophet divided it among the Muhājirīn, his Companions who had migrated from Makkah, and two from among the Anṣār, Sahl ibn Ḥanīf and Abū Dujānah ibn Simāk, both of whom were poor. The Muhājirīn had no property in Madīnah, having had to abandon everything they had in Makkah. The Anṣār welcomed them and accommodated them in their own homes, showing a very high degree of generosity and hospitality. As this occasion presented itself, the Prophet wanted to set things right within the Muslim community, so that the poor would have their own property. Thus, wealth would not circulate only among the rich in society.

Some people – most probably hypocrites – spoke out, criticizing the Prophet's action. God states in this *sūrah*: "*Whatever gains were taken from them God has turned over to His Messenger; you did not have to spur horse or riding-camel for its sake. God gives His messengers mastery over whomever He wills. God has power over all things.*" (Verse 6) The Prophet said to the Anṣār: "If you wish, you may give a share of your property

and your homes to your brethren, the Muhājirīn, and then you will share with them this gain. On the other hand, if you prefer, you keep your property and your homes for yourselves but you will have no share of this gain." True to their generous character, the Anṣār said: "We will give them a share of our property and homes and we will leave this gain to them, taking no share of it."

Commenting on this, the *sūrah* says: "*[Such gains are for] the poor migrants who have been driven out of their homes and possessions, seeking God's favour and His goodly acceptance, and who help God and His Messenger. These are the ones who are true. And to those who were already firmly established in their homes and in faith, those who love the ones that seek refuge with them and harbour no desire in their hearts for whatever the others may have been given. They give them preference over themselves, even though they are in want. Those who are saved from their own greed are truly successful.*" (Verses 8–9)

Such were the events that led to the revelation of this *sūrah*, and to which its statements and rules refer, including the verses close to its end which address the believers who witnessed these events. This is in line with the Qur'ānic method of educating believers and refining their Islamic sense as it comments on events and demonstrates the link between them and fundamental truths. The last note in the *sūrah* mentions a number of God's attributes that have a direct bearing on the universe and its affairs. When these are fully understood, belief in God becomes enlightened, based on full awareness of the truth.

The *sūrah* begins and ends with glorification of God, to whom the heavens and the earth belong, the Almighty, the Wise. Thus, the beginning and end are in perfect harmony with the subject matter of the *sūrah* and the call to the believers to remain God-fearing and to reflect on God's planning.

Al-Ḥashr (The Gathering)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

Everything in the heavens and everything on earth extols God's limitless glory. He is the Almighty, the Wise. (1)

سَبَّحَ لِلَّهِ مَا فِى ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَمَا فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ ۖ وَهُوَ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلْحَكِيمُ ﴿١﴾

It is He who drove the unbelievers among the people of earlier revelations out of their homes at the first gathering. You never thought they would go; while they thought that their fortifications would protect them against God. God came upon them from where they had not expected, casting terror into their hearts. Thus, they destroyed their homes by their own hands, as well as the hands of the believers. Learn from their example, you who are endowed with insight. (2)

هُوَ ٱلَّذِىٓ أَخْرَجَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ مِنْ أَهْلِ ٱلْكِتَٰبِ مِن دِيَٰرِهِمْ لِأَوَّلِ ٱلْحَشْرِ ۚ مَا ظَنَنتُمْ أَن يَخْرُجُوا۟ ۖ وَظَنُّوٓا۟ أَنَّهُم مَّانِعَتُهُمْ حُصُونُهُم مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ فَأَتَىٰهُمُ ٱللَّهُ مِنْ حَيْثُ لَمْ يَحْتَسِبُوا۟ ۖ وَقَذَفَ فِى قُلُوبِهِمُ ٱلرُّعْبَ ۚ يُخْرِبُونَ بُيُوتَهُم بِأَيْدِيهِمْ وَأَيْدِى ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ فَٱعْتَبِرُوا۟ يَٰٓأُو۟لِى ٱلْأَبْصَٰرِ ﴿٢﴾

Had it not been for God's having decreed exile for them, He would surely have inflicted [greater] suffering on them in this world. In the life to come they will still endure suffering through the fire (3)

وَلَوْلَآ أَن كَتَبَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَيْهِمُ ٱلْجَلَآءَ لَعَذَّبَهُمْ فِى ٱلدُّنْيَا ۖ وَلَهُمْ فِى ٱلْءَاخِرَةِ عَذَابُ ٱلنَّارِ ﴿٣﴾

because they have defied God and His Messenger. Whoever defies God – well, God is severe in retribution. (4)

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ شَاقُّوا اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ ۖ وَمَن يُشَاقِّ اللَّهَ فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ شَدِيدُ الْعِقَابِ ﴿٤﴾

Whatever of their palm trees you [believers] may have cut down or left standing on their roots, it was done by God's leave, so that He might disgrace the transgressors. (5)

مَا قَطَعْتُم مِّن لِّينَةٍ أَوْ تَرَكْتُمُوهَا قَائِمَةً عَلَىٰ أُصُولِهَا فَبِإِذْنِ اللَّهِ وَلِيُخْزِيَ الْفَاسِقِينَ ﴿٥﴾

Whatever gains were taken from them God has turned over to His Messenger; you did not have to spur horse or riding-camel for its sake. God gives His messengers mastery over whomever He wills. God has power over all things. (6)

وَمَا أَفَاءَ اللَّهُ عَلَىٰ رَسُولِهِ مِنْهُمْ فَمَا أَوْجَفْتُمْ عَلَيْهِ مِنْ خَيْلٍ وَلَا رِكَابٍ وَلَٰكِنَّ اللَّهَ يُسَلِّطُ رُسُلَهُ عَلَىٰ مَن يَشَاءُ ۚ وَاللَّهُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ﴿٦﴾

Whatever gains God turns over to His Messenger from the people of the townships belong to God, the Messenger, kinsfolk, orphans, the needy and the traveller in need. Thus, they would not just circulate among those of you who are rich. Whatever the Messenger gives you, take it; and whatever he forbids you, abstain from it. Remain God-fearing; for God is severe in retribution. (7)

مَّا أَفَاءَ اللَّهُ عَلَىٰ رَسُولِهِ مِنْ أَهْلِ الْقُرَىٰ فَلِلَّهِ وَلِلرَّسُولِ وَلِذِي الْقُرْبَىٰ وَالْيَتَامَىٰ وَالْمَسَاكِينِ وَابْنِ السَّبِيلِ كَيْ لَا يَكُونَ دُولَةً بَيْنَ الْأَغْنِيَاءِ مِنكُمْ ۚ وَمَا آتَاكُمُ الرَّسُولُ فَخُذُوهُ وَمَا نَهَاكُمْ عَنْهُ فَانتَهُوا ۚ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ ۖ إِنَّ اللَّهَ شَدِيدُ الْعِقَابِ ﴿٧﴾

[Such gains are for] the poor migrants who have been driven out of their homes and possessions, seeking God's favour and His goodly acceptance, and who help God and His Messenger. These are the ones who are true. (8)

لِلْفُقَرَاءِ الْمُهَاجِرِينَ الَّذِينَ أُخْرِجُوا مِن
دِيَارِهِمْ وَأَمْوَالِهِمْ يَبْتَغُونَ فَضْلًا مِّنَ
اللَّهِ وَرِضْوَانًا وَيَنصُرُونَ اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ ۚ
أُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الصَّادِقُونَ ﴿٨﴾

And to those who were already firmly established in the Home and in faith, those who love the ones that seek refuge with them and harbour no desire in their hearts for whatever the others may have been given. They give them preference over themselves, even though they are in want. Those who are saved from their own greed are truly successful. (9)

وَالَّذِينَ تَبَوَّءُوا الدَّارَ وَالْإِيمَانَ مِن
قَبْلِهِمْ يُحِبُّونَ مَنْ هَاجَرَ إِلَيْهِمْ
وَلَا يَجِدُونَ فِي صُدُورِهِمْ حَاجَةً
مِّمَّا أُوتُوا وَيُؤْثِرُونَ عَلَىٰ أَنفُسِهِمْ
وَلَوْ كَانَ بِهِمْ خَصَاصَةٌ ۚ وَمَن يُوقَ شُحَّ
نَفْسِهِ فَأُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الْمُفْلِحُونَ ﴿٩﴾

Those who come after them pray: 'Our Lord! Forgive us and forgive our brethren who preceded us in faith. Leave no malice in our hearts towards those who believe. Lord, You are compassionate, ever merciful.' (10)

وَالَّذِينَ جَاءُوا مِن بَعْدِهِمْ يَقُولُونَ
رَبَّنَا اغْفِرْ لَنَا وَلِإِخْوَانِنَا الَّذِينَ
سَبَقُونَا بِالْإِيمَانِ وَلَا تَجْعَلْ فِي قُلُوبِنَا
غِلًّا لِّلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا رَبَّنَا إِنَّكَ رَءُوفٌ
رَّحِيمٌ ﴿١٠﴾

Are you not aware of those hypocrites who say to their brethren who disbelieve among the people of earlier revelations, 'If you are driven out, we shall most certainly go with you, and shall

أَلَمْ تَرَ إِلَى الَّذِينَ نَافَقُوا يَقُولُونَ
لِإِخْوَانِهِمُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا مِنْ أَهْلِ
الْكِتَابِ لَئِنْ أُخْرِجْتُمْ لَنَخْرُجَنَّ

مَعَكُمْ وَلَا نُطِيعُ فِيكُمْ أَحَدًا أَبَدًا وَإِن
قُوتِلْتُمْ لَنَنصُرَنَّكُمْ وَٱللَّهُ يَشْهَدُ إِنَّهُمْ
لَكَٰذِبُونَ ﴿١١﴾

never pay heed to anyone against you; and if you are attacked, we shall most certainly come to your aid'? God bears witness that they are indeed liars. (11)

لَئِنْ أُخْرِجُوا۟ لَا يَخْرُجُونَ مَعَهُمْ وَلَئِن
قُوتِلُوا۟ لَا يَنصُرُونَهُمْ وَلَئِن نَّصَرُوهُمْ
لَيُوَلُّنَّ ٱلْأَدْبَٰرَ ثُمَّ لَا يُنصَرُونَ ﴿١٢﴾

If they are driven out, they will not go with them; and if they are attacked, they will not help them. Even if they come to their aid, they will most certainly turn their backs in flight; and in the end they will have no help. (12)

لَأَنتُمْ أَشَدُّ رَهْبَةً فِى صُدُورِهِم مِّنَ
ٱللَّهِ ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ قَوْمٌ لَّا يَفْقَهُونَ ﴿١٣﴾

You, [believers,] arouse in their hearts a fear more intense than their fear of God, because they are devoid of understanding. (13)

لَا يُقَٰتِلُونَكُمْ جَمِيعًا إِلَّا فِى قُرًى
مُّحَصَّنَةٍ أَوْ مِن وَرَآءِ جُدُرٍۭ بَأْسُهُم بَيْنَهُمْ
شَدِيدٌ تَحْسَبُهُمْ جَمِيعًا وَقُلُوبُهُمْ شَتَّىٰ
ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ قَوْمٌ لَّا يَعْقِلُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

They will never fight you even in a body except from within fortified strongholds or from behind walls. Strong is their internal hostility. You may think that they are united when in fact their hearts are at odds with one another, because they are people who will not use their reason. (14)

كَمَثَلِ ٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِهِمْ قَرِيبًا ذَاقُوا۟
وَبَالَ أَمْرِهِمْ وَلَهُمْ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ﴿١٥﴾

Like those who, a short while before them, had to taste the evil that came from their own doings. Painful suffering is in store for them. (15)

Like Satan, who says to man, 'Reject the faith!' Yet when man disbelieves, Satan says, 'I here and now disown you. I fear God, the Lord of all the worlds.' (16)

كَمَثَلِ ٱلشَّيْطَٰنِ إِذْ قَالَ لِلْإِنسَٰنِ ٱكْفُرْ
فَلَمَّا كَفَرَ قَالَ إِنِّى بَرِىٓءٌ مِّنكَ إِنِّىٓ
أَخَافُ ٱللَّهَ رَبَّ ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿١٦﴾

Both will end up in the fire, where they will abide. Such is the reward of the wrongdoers. (17)

فَكَانَ عَٰقِبَتَهُمَآ أَنَّهُمَا فِى ٱلنَّارِ خَٰلِدَيْنِ
فِيهَا ۚ وَذَٰلِكَ جَزَٰٓؤُا۟ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ﴿١٧﴾

Believers, have fear of God. Let every soul consider carefully what it sends ahead for tomorrow. Remain God-fearing, for God is fully aware of all that you do. (18)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ ٱتَّقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ وَلْتَنظُرْ
نَفْسٌ مَّا قَدَّمَتْ لِغَدٍ ۖ وَٱتَّقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ
خَبِيرٌۢ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٨﴾

Be not like those who forget God, so God causes them to forget their own souls. They are the transgressors. (19)

وَلَا تَكُونُوا۟ كَٱلَّذِينَ نَسُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ فَأَنسَىٰهُمْ
أَنفُسَهُمْ ۚ أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلْفَٰسِقُونَ ﴿١٩﴾

Not equal are the ones destined for the fire and the ones destined for paradise. Those who are destined for paradise are indeed the ones who will triumph. (20)

لَا يَسْتَوِىٓ أَصْحَٰبُ ٱلنَّارِ وَأَصْحَٰبُ ٱلْجَنَّةِ ۚ
أَصْحَٰبُ ٱلْجَنَّةِ هُمُ ٱلْفَآئِزُونَ ﴿٢٠﴾

Had We brought down this Qur'ān upon a mountain, you would have seen it humble itself and break asunder for fear of God. We put such images before people so that they may reflect. (21)

لَوْ أَنزَلْنَا هَٰذَا ٱلْقُرْءَانَ عَلَىٰ جَبَلٍ لَّرَأَيْتَهُۥ
خَٰشِعًا مُّتَصَدِّعًا مِّنْ خَشْيَةِ ٱللَّهِ ۚ
وَتِلْكَ ٱلْأَمْثَٰلُ نَضْرِبُهَا لِلنَّاسِ
لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ ﴿٢١﴾

He is God: there is no deity other than Him. It is He who knows all that is beyond the reach of anyone's perception, as well as all that which can be witnessed. He is the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful. (22)

هُوَ ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِى لَآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ ۖ عَٰلِمُ ٱلْغَيْبِ وَٱلشَّهَٰدَةِ ۖ هُوَ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنُ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ﴿٢٢﴾

He is God: there is no deity other than Him, the Sovereign, the Holy, the Source of Peace, the Giver of Faith, the Guardian over all, the Almighty, the Compeller, to whom all greatness belongs. Exalted is God in His limitless glory above anything they associate as partner with Him. (23)

هُوَ ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِى لَآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ ٱلْمَلِكُ ٱلْقُدُّوسُ ٱلسَّلَٰمُ ٱلْمُؤْمِنُ ٱلْمُهَيْمِنُ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلْجَبَّارُ ٱلْمُتَكَبِّرُ ۚ سُبْحَٰنَ ٱللَّهِ عَمَّا يُشْرِكُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

He is God: the Creator, the Maker who gives shape and form to all. His are the most gracious names. Everything in the heavens and earth extols His limitless glory. He alone is the Almighty, the Wise. (24)

هُوَ ٱللَّهُ ٱلْخَٰلِقُ ٱلْبَارِئُ ٱلْمُصَوِّرُ ۖ لَهُ ٱلْأَسْمَآءُ ٱلْحُسْنَىٰ ۚ يُسَبِّحُ لَهُۥ مَا فِى ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ ۖ وَهُوَ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلْحَكِيمُ ﴿٢٤﴾

God's Direct Action

Everything in the heavens and everything on earth extols God's limitless glory. He is the Almighty, the Wise. (Verse 1)

This opening verse states a truth that takes place in the universe, where everything in the heavens and earth extols God's glory and praises Him alone. This is how the *sūrah* that relates the events leading to the evacuation of the unbelievers among the people of earlier revelations and

giving their land as a free gain to the believers who extol His glory and praise Him with His attributes begins. It is He who is the Almighty, able to give victory to those who believe in Him and destroy His enemies, the Wise who plans everything in accordance with a definite purpose.

The *sūrah* then gives us an account of the events leading to its revelation:

> *It is He who drove the unbelievers among the people of earlier revelations out of their homes at the first gathering. You never thought they would go; while they thought that their fortifications would protect them against God. God came upon them from where they had not expected, casting terror into their hearts. Thus, they destroyed their homes by their own hands, as well as the hands of the believers. Learn from their example, you who are endowed with insight. Had it not been for God's having decreed exile for them, He would surely have inflicted [greater] suffering on them in this world. In the life to come they will still endure suffering through the fire because they have defied God and His Messenger. Whoever defies God – well, God is severe in retribution.* (Verses 2–4)

From these verses we learn that it was God who drove those unbelievers among the people of earlier revelations out of their homes, which is described here as the first gathering. God is indeed the doer of whatever takes place, but the way the statement is phrased lays direct emphasis on this fact, implying that God undertook to drive them out, without putting it under the cover of human action. It was He who drove them to the land from where they will be gathered, which means that they could not return to the land from which they were evacuated.

God's direct action is further emphasized in the following sentences in the verse: "*You never thought they would go; while they thought that their fortifications would protect them against God.*" (Verse 2) You did not expect them to leave, and they could not have imagined that this would happen to them. Within their fortifications, so they believed, they were just too strong to be driven out. They felt themselves secure, forgetting God's power that cannot be stopped by mere fortifications.

"*God came upon them from where they had not expected, casting terror into their hearts.*" (Verse 2) He came upon them from within themselves,

not from within their fortifications. He struck fear in their hearts, and so they opened the gates to their fortifications with their own hands. He showed them that they were not in possession of their own souls, and could not control their hearts. They could not defy God with their willpower, let alone with buildings and forts. They reckoned with every possibility except that they would be attacked from within themselves. Thus is the case when God wills something to happen. He approaches it as He knows best and from where He can; He certainly knows everything and is able to accomplish what He wants. There is no need, then, for the means people resort to. Instead, the means for Him are always there, ready to use. All means and causes are of His own making; none is difficult for Him to employ. He is indeed the Almighty, the Wise.

Those unbelievers from among the people of earlier revelations sought to shield themselves from attack by staying within their fortifications, but God came upon them from where they least expected, scaring them to the bone. They thought they had protection within their homes, but God made them destroy their own homes themselves and He allowed the believers to partake in this destruction: "*Thus, they destroyed their homes by their own hands, as well as the hands of the believers.*" (Verse 2) Thus the account of what happened to those people is complete, portrayed in a telling image.

Here the *sūrah* adds the first comment: "*Learn from their example, you who are endowed with insight.*" (Verse 2) This instruction comes at the right moment, when minds are ready to receive a lesson and learn from it.

The next verse establishes that since God willed to take them to task for their treachery, they could not escape some form of punishment in this life, in addition to what awaits them in the life to come: "*Had it not been for God's having decreed exile for them, He would surely have inflicted [greater] suffering on them in this world. In the life to come they will still endure suffering through the fire.*" (Verse 3) That they would be made to suffer in this life, in some form or another, was a foregone conclusion. Had God not chosen their evacuation, He would have punished them in some other way, and whatever punishment they would have suffered in this life was in addition to what they will receive in the hereafter.

They merited both, "*because they have defied God and His Messenger. Whoever defies God – well, God is severe in retribution.*" (Verse 4) The Arabic word, *shāqqū*, translated here as 'defied', means to take a side other than God's. As He explains why they merited such punishment, God made His Messenger's side His own. Therefore, in the second half of the verse He mentions their being in defiance of Him only, as this automatically includes defying the Prophet. When defiant people take a side opposite to God's, they behave insolently. Rather stupidly, such small, powerless creatures expose themselves to God's anger and incur His severe retribution.

Thus, as we look at what happened to those unbelievers of the people of earlier religions, we understand the fate that is bound to overtake those who defy God at any time and place. We should not fail to notice that the *sūrah* repeatedly refers to them as '*unbelievers from among the people of earlier revelations*'. This is certainly true because they disbelieved in the divine faith in its final and complete form revealed to the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him). Those Jews were expecting his message. Moreover, referring to them in this way explains why they were punished. It also reassures the believers of the correctness of what they did to them.

The *sūrah* then reassures the believers that all that they did to those who defied God and His Messenger, such as cutting and burning their palm trees, was right. It thus gives God's verdict on it, particularly because some Muslims were rather unsure about their actions:

> *Whatever of their palm trees you [believers] may have cut down or left standing on their roots, it was done by God's leave, so that He might disgrace the transgressors.* (Verse 5)

Prior to this event and subsequently, the Muslims were and are not permitted to cause such destruction. This case, then, provided an exception, and it needed explanation and reassurance. It is thus explained in this verse that both what they did or did not do in respect of the palm trees was by God's permission. It is He who handled this encounter, putting His will into effect. All that happened was by His leave, for the purpose of bringing disgrace upon the transgressors. Cutting their trees

caused the al-Naḍīr grief, while leaving some standing similarly grieved them because they had to leave these behind.

Thus the believers were reassured that they were only the tool for God's will to be fulfilled.

Gains Achieved Without a War

The second part of the *sūrah* lays down the rules concerning gains that were granted by God to the Muslim community in this encounter and in similar ones, where the Muslims achieved victory without having to fight. These rules apply to any conflict where God's hand works directly, without human cover:

> *Whatever gains were taken from them God has turned over to His Messenger; you did not have to spur horse or riding-camel for its sake. God gives His messengers mastery over whomever He wills. God has power over all things. Whatever gains God turns over to His Messenger from the people of the townships belong to God, the Messenger, kinsfolk, orphans, the needy and the traveller in need. Thus, they would not just circulate among those of you who are rich. Whatever the Messenger gives you, take it; and whatever he forbids you, abstain from it. Remain God-fearing; for God is severe in retribution. [Such gains are for] the poor migrants who have been driven out of their homes and possessions, seeking God's favour and His goodly acceptance, and who help God and His Messenger. These are the ones who are true. And to those who were already firmly established in the Home and in faith, those who love the ones that seek refuge with them and harbour no desire in their hearts for whatever the others may have been given. They give them preference over themselves, even though they are in want. Those who are saved from their own greed are truly successful. Those who come after them pray: 'Our Lord! Forgive us and forgive our brethren who preceded us in faith. Leave no malice in our hearts towards those who believe. Lord, You are compassionate, ever merciful.* (Verses 6–10)

These verses include a description of the conditions prevailing for the Muslim community at that time. They also state the nature and

distinctive features of the Muslim community that make its strong bonds survive from one generation, race and individual to another, across the centuries and throughout the world. This is a great truth that we should reflect upon.

"*Whatever gains were taken from them God has turned over to His Messenger; you did not have to spur horse or riding-camel for its sake. God gives His messengers mastery over whomever He wills. God has power over all things.*" (Verse 6) This verse mentions that these gains left over by the al-Naḍīr Jews were taken by the Muslims without them having to ride a horse or a camel, let alone fight in order to lay their hands upon them. Hence, it is not to be treated like war booty. Only one fifth of what the Muslims gain in war is reserved for God, His Messenger, his own kinsfolk, orphans, the needy and travellers in want. The rest, i.e. four-fifths, is distributed among those who take part in the war itself. This rule concerning war gains was laid down in *Sūrah* 8, The Spoils of War, revealed shortly after the Battle of Badr. Here, however, the present *sūrah* rules that these new gains, made without a fight, belong only to God, His Messenger, his own kinsfolk, orphans, the needy and travellers in want. It is God's Messenger who undertakes the spending of these gains in this way and for these purposes.

The Prophet's own kinsfolk are singled out here as beneficiaries of such gains because the poor among them are not allowed to take *zakāt* money or charity. Moreover, the Prophet was not to be inherited by his relatives. Whatever he left behind was to be given to charity, charity in which his relatives had no share.[2] Since there were poor people among his relatives, God gave them a share of any war gains as well as gains made without war. They were included among the beneficiaries of enemy gains that God had assigned to His Messenger: one fifth of war gains and all gains without war. The other beneficiaries of these gains are well known.

This ruling is clearly stated in the *sūrah*. However, it does not stop at stating the immediate reason for this ruling, but rather opens our eyes

2. Scholars differ as to whether only the poor among the Prophet's relatives received this share, or whether it was given to all of them, even those who were not poor. The weightier view is that they all received a share.

to an important truth: "*God gives His messengers mastery over whomever He wills.*" (Verse 6) It is all by God's will, and His messengers are part of that will, giving them power over anyone or any community He chooses: "*God has power over all things.*" (Verse 6)

Thus the role of God's messengers is seen to be closely linked to God's direct will. Although they are ordinary human beings, they have a special link with God's will, giving them a particular role in how God brings about what He wants to happen on earth. They do not act at their own behest; nor do they take or leave anything for their own interest. When they go to war, face anyone in conflict, or make peace with any one, they only do so to fulfil an aspect of God's will that has been made dependent on their own actions. It is God who is the actor behind all this. It is He who has power over all things.

Money Circulation

"*Whatever gains God turns over to His Messenger from the people of the townships belong to God, the Messenger, kinsfolk, orphans, the needy and the traveller in need. Thus, they would not just circulate among those of you who are rich. Whatever the Messenger gives you, take it; and whatever he forbids you, abstain from it. Remain God-fearing; for God is severe in retribution.*" (Verse 7) This verse gives the details of the ruling before stating a major rule of the Muslim community's economic and social system: thus, money "*would not just circulate among those of you who are rich.*" (Verse 7) This is followed by a major constitutional rule: "*Whatever the Messenger gives you, take it; and whatever he forbids you, abstain from it.*" (Verse 7) Although these two rules are stated in connection with the gains made in this encounter and how they were to be distributed, both rules go beyond the immediate event to state fundamental principles for the Islamic social system.

The first of these two rules defines a major aspect of the Islamic economic system which approves private ownership but makes it subject to this rule that excludes the possibility of wealth being circulated only among the rich in society. Whatever situation leads to the poor being outside the general circulation of wealth, keeping it only in the hands of

the rich, is contrary to the Islamic economic system and works against one of its major social organization objectives. All transactions in the Muslim community must be so organized so as not to allow such a situation to develop, and to dismantle it if it does exist.

The Islamic system is actually based on this rule. Thus, it makes *zakāt* an essential duty. Its revenue consists of 2.5% of money including financial assets, 5% or 10% of all agricultural produce, a similar percentage of cattle and one-fifth of mineral resources.[3] These are substantial shares. In addition, Islam gives 80% of war gains to those who so fight, whether they are rich or poor, but gains made without war are paid totally to those in need. The system Islam approves of for renting agricultural land is based on sharing the produce between the owner and the renter. Moreover, the Islamic system allows the Islamic government, in periods of hardship, to take all surplus the rich have to distribute to the poor. If it happens that the state treasury runs out of funds, such surplus may be invested for the public interest. Islam strictly forbids monopoly and usury, which are the two main tools that lead to money being circulated purely among the rich. This shows that the whole economic system Islam lays down is geared to implementing this most important rule. Furthermore, whilst this constitutes a major check on private ownership, Islam also places other checks on it as well.[4]

Thus, we see that the Islamic system allows for private ownership, but it is not a capitalist system. Nor is capitalism borrowed from the Islamic economic system. No capitalist system can function without monopoly or usury. The Islamic system is unique, laid down by the One who is Wise, All-Aware. It started on its own, developed on its own and remains unique, well balanced between rights and duties. It maintains the same balance as the rest of the universe, because it is made by the Creator of the universe.

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3. The author mentions that the *zakāt* revenue from mineral resources is taxed at the same percentage as money. This is either a mistake or based on a certain scholar's view. The consensus is rather that one-fifth of mineral resources is paid to *zakāt*. – Editor's note.

4. This is explained in detail in a chapter on 'monetary policy' in our book *Social Justice in Islam*, which is available in Engish.

The Only Source of Legislation

The second rule laid down in the verse defines the only source of legislation: "*Whatever the Messenger gives you, take it; and whatever he forbids you, abstain from it.*" (Verse 7) This rule sums up the Islamic constitution. The authority of the law in the Islamic system is based on the fact that legislation is given to us by the Prophet in the form of the Qur'ān or the *Sunnah*. The entire community, including the ruler and government machinery, cannot enact any law that is contrary to what is given to us by the Prophet. Should it enact such a law, that law is devoid of authority, because it lacks the very basis of authority. This system is contrary to all man-made theories, including those which make the community, or the nation, the source of all authorities, giving the nation the right to enact whatever legislations it chooses. Under Islam, authority belongs to God's legislation as stated and explained by His Messenger. The Muslim community's role is to keep Islamic law intact and to implement it. The ruler and the government undertake this task on behalf of the community. These are the limits of the Muslim community, and it cannot act contrary to what the Prophet has stated in any aspect of the law.

In any area where no legislation is stated, the community may enact what it deems to be suitable, provided that it is not contrary to any principle stated by the Prophet. This is part of the Islamic system. Any legislation to be enacted must follow what the Prophet taught, if there is a statement about it, and must not be in conflict with any Islamic principle if no such statement is available. The authority of the Muslim community, and its government, remains within these limits. This is a unique system, unlike any man-made system. It ensures harmony between the legislation for human society, which is from God, and the law that governs the universe, which is set by God. Should there be conflict between human law and universal law, man would be in utter misery.

The Qur'ānic verse inspires believers' hearts to see the link between these two major rules and their original source, i.e. God, calling on them to remain conscious of Him: "*Remain God-fearing; for God is severe in retribution.*" (Verse 7) This is the best guarantee that cannot

be evaded. Believers realize that God knows their inner thoughts and feelings, is aware of all actions, and that to Him all will return. They also know that His punishment is severe indeed. They are aware that God wants them to ensure that wealth does not circulate only among the rich in the community. They further know that it is their duty to accept willingly and obediently whatever the Prophet gives them and to discard whatever he forbids them.

The distribution of the gains made from the al-Naḍīr among the Muhājirīn only and two people from the Anṣār was a special measure that applied only in this case, to achieve the purpose of the main rule that states that wealth "*would not just circulate among those of you who are rich.*" (Verse 7) The general rule is that it should be divided among the poor generally, from among the Muhājirīn and the Anṣār, and also those of later generations. This is stated in the verses that follow. However, the Qur'ān does not state its rulings in abstracts. It puts them in a context that interacts with people. Hence, it gives each one of the three groups qualities that mirror its true nature.

Three Groups of Distinction

"*[Such gains are for] the poor migrants who have been driven out of their homes and possessions, seeking God's favour and His goodly acceptance, and who help God and His Messenger. These are the ones who are true.*" (Verse 8) This is a true picture highlighting the main features of the Muhājirīn. They were certainly forced to flee their home town, Makkah, under much pressure and persecution by their own kinsfolk and tribesmen. They committed no offence other than believing in God alone. They abandoned their homes and possessions "*seeking God's favour and His goodly acceptance.*" (Verse 8) They realized that they had no helper or protector other than Him. Although they were few in number, chased everywhere, they "*help God and His Messenger,*" with their hearts and swords, even at the hardest and most critical of times. Hence, they have earned the good description given to them in the Qur'ān: "*These are the ones who are true.*" (Verse 8) They said the word indicating their belief and confirmed it with their actions. They were true to their claim that they had chosen Him above all else, and true to their pledge to God's

Messenger that they would follow him. They were true to the truth, making of themselves a living version of it.

"*And to those who were already firmly established in the Home and in faith, those who love the ones that seek refuge with them and harbour no desire in their hearts for whatever the others may have been given. They give them preference over themselves, even though they are in want. Those who are saved from their own greed are truly successful.*" (Verse 9) This is again a bright, true picture showing the Anṣār's main distinctive features. These were a unique group of people. They achieved, in practice, standards which most people would think too idealistic to be true and rose to levels that were too high even for our imaginations.

"*And to those who were already firmly established in the Home and in faith.*" (Verse 9) The Home means the town, Yathrib, to which the Prophet and his followers in Makkah migrated. Thereafter, it has been known as Madīnah, meaning The City, or the Prophet's own city. The Anṣār were firmly settled there, long before the arrival of the Muhājirīn. They were also firmly established in faith, as if faith had become a part of their own dwelling place. The image here has clear connotations, yet it is the closest description of the Anṣār's attitude towards faith. It became their place of living where their hearts and souls settled in peace. They flocked to it like homing pigeons.

The Anṣār "*love the ones that seek refuge with them and harbour no desire in their hearts for whatever the others may have been given.*" (Verse 9) We do not find in human history an event similar to the reception given by the Anṣār to the Muhājirīn: it reflected genuine love and unparalleled generosity. The Anṣār happily shared their possessions with their immigrant brethren, competing with each other in offering them their homes and shouldering the burden of hospitality. It is reported that in every case, lots were drawn to decide where each one of the Muhājirīn would settle, because the numbers of the Anṣār offering their homes were more than the numbers of the Muhājirīn needing to be settled. They "*harbour no desire in their hearts for whatever the others may have been given.*" (Verse 9) The Muhājirīn are, at times, given an exceptionally high position, but the Anṣār harbour no feeling of envy as a result. They may be given special treatment, as in the case of the gains made in this encounter. Again the Anṣār accept this willingly.

We note that the verse does not say that they 'harbour no grudge', but rather it uses the word 'desire', which adds to the impression we have of the Anṣār's pure hearts.

"*They give them preference over themselves, even though they are in want.*" (Verse 9) To give preference to others when one is in need oneself is a high summit to reach, one which the Anṣār scaled in a way unknown anywhere else in human history. This was their true description in every case. They always exceeded what is normal in people's lives.

"*Those who are saved from their own greed are truly successful.*" (Verse 9) It is personal greed that hinders every good thing. Goodness means giving in one way or another: one gives away money, love, emotions, effort and indeed one gives one's life when necessary. A person with greed cannot do what is good, because he always wants to take and not give. Therefore, a person saved from his own greed is spared the need to overcome this obstacle. He moves on to give generously with a feeling of gratification. This is true success.

"*Those who come after them pray: 'Our Lord! Forgive us and forgive our brethren who preceded us in faith. Leave no malice in our hearts towards those who believe. Lord, You are compassionate, ever merciful.'*" (Verse 10) This is the third bright picture that brings into sharp relief the features of the generation that was to follow, as well as the features of the Muslim community at all places and times.

When this *sūrah* was revealed, this group that was to follow on the heels of the Muhājirīn and the Anṣār had not yet come into existence. They were there in God's knowledge, which is free of restrictions of time and place. The main feature of this group is that they would appeal to God for forgiveness, not only for themselves but also for those believers who went ahead of them. They would also appeal to be free of all grudges against all believers, with whom they share the bond of faith. They recognized that God is most compassionate and merciful, so they would appeal to Him by these two qualities: "*Lord, You are compassionate, ever merciful.*" (Verse 10)

The true nature and wonder of the Muslim community is clearly depicted in these verses. We recognize the strong bond that unites all generations of believers generating feelings of love and compassion between them, as well as a feeling of closeness that transcends time, place,

race and family. It is a bond that takes precedence over all else, stirring pleasant feelings across generations. A believer remembers another who lived many centuries earlier, just like he remembers one who lives next door, and warms to him with love and honour. The present generation of believers takes into account the needs of future generations, and the ones still to come will follow in the footsteps of their predecessors. They all constitute one rank, in the same brigade, across generations, despite belonging to countries and times that may be very wide apart. They all march steadily, under God's banner, trying to achieve the high standards expected of them, looking up to their Lord, the Compassionate, the Ever Merciful.

It is a wonderful, amazing picture, yet it represents a reality as well as the best ideal cherished by noble hearts. The beauty and nobility of this picture of humanity can be best appreciated when compared to the image of malice and rancour that Communism glorifies in Marx's gospel.[5] That malice continues to perpetuate itself in an increasing grudge against social classes, past generations of humanity, contemporary communities that reject such social grudges, and against religion and believers of all faiths and communities.

The two situations are wide apart: they share no feature, colour or shade. One of them elevates humanity to the highest standards it can achieve, and the other takes it down to its lowest possible level. The first represents generations of humanity transcending barriers of time, place, race, country, tribe and family and promoting a bond of love and compassion, with pure hearts that are free of all grudges or selfishness, seeking only God's pleasure. The other shows humanity in conflict, with people always in strife, harbouring wicked feelings towards each other and resorting to deception, cheating and evil. It shows people doing so even when they are praying in their temples, because it looks at prayer as a trick and considers religion to be nothing but a trap set by capitalists for their workers.

"*Our Lord! Forgive us and forgive our brethren who preceded us in faith. Leave no malice in our hearts towards those who believe. Lord, You*

5. The author wrote this in the heyday of Communism when it was making long strides in the Third World generally, and in Egypt specifically where he was imprisoned and Communists were on the ascendancy. – Editor's note.

are compassionate, ever merciful." (Verse 10) Such is the prayer of the believers marching in the procession of faith. It is a noble prayer for a noble procession.

False Promises

The *sūrah* now turns back to discuss the event itself, painting a picture of another group that played a role in it, the hypocrites:

> *Are you not aware of those hypocrites who say to their brethren who disbelieve among the people of earlier revelations, 'If you are driven out, we shall most certainly go with you, and shall never pay heed to anyone against you; and if you are attacked, we shall most certainly come to your aid'? God bears witness that they are indeed liars. If they are driven out, they will not go with them; and if they are attacked, they will not help them. Even if they come to their aid, they will most certainly turn their backs in flight; and in the end they will have no help. You, [believers,] arouse in their hearts a fear more intense than their fear of God, because they are devoid of understanding. They will never fight you even in a body except from within fortified strongholds or from behind walls. Strong is their internal hostility. You may think that they are united when in fact their hearts are at odds with one another, because they are people who will not use their reason. Like those who, a short while before them, had to taste the evil that came from their own doings. Painful suffering is in store for them. Like Satan, who says to man, 'Reject the faith!' Yet when man disbelieves, Satan says, 'I here and now disown you. I fear God, the Lord of all the worlds.' Both will end up in the fire, where they will abide. Such is the reward of the wrongdoers.* (Verses 11–17)

The *sūrah* reports on what the hypocrites said to the al-Naḍīr Jews, promising them support, but then letting them down and showing that they cared nothing for their own promises. Every sentence in these verses states a fact, touches hearts, stirs up feelings and establishes a principle of education, knowledge and unshakeable faith.

The first of these establishes a bond of kinship between the hypocrites and the unbelievers from among the people of earlier revelations: "*Are*

you not aware of those hypocrites who say to their brethren who disbelieve among the people of earlier revelations..." (Verse 11) The ones to whom the *sūrah* refers as people of earlier revelations are unbelievers, and the hypocrites are their brethren, despite the fact that they claim to be Muslims. Then the *sūrah* gives a full and vivid picture of the hypocrites' promises and assurances to their brethren: "*If you are driven out, we shall most certainly go with you, and shall never pay heed to anyone against you; and if you are attacked, we shall most certainly come to your aid'?"* (Verse 11) God, who knows what they truly are, states and confirms otherwise: "*God bears witness that they are indeed liars. If they are driven out, they will not go with them; and if they are attacked, they will not help them. Even if they come to their aid, they will most certainly turn their backs in flight; and in the end they will have no help.*" (Verses 11–12) Events confirmed that what God stated was true and what they promised their brethren was false.

The *sūrah* then states a fact explaining what those people, hypocrites and unbelievers from among the people of earlier religions, truly felt: "*You, [believers,] arouse in their hearts a fear more intense than their fear of God, because they are devoid of understanding.*" (Verse 13) They feared the believers more than they feared God. Had they truly feared God, they would not have feared anyone else. Only one type of fear can exist in a person's heart; fear of God can never exist side by side with fear of anyone else. All might belongs to God alone. All powers in the universe are subject to His will: "*There is no living creature which He does not hold by its forelock.*" (11: 56) Why, then, would a God-fearing person feel afraid of anyone else? However, the people who do not understand this truth fear God's creatures more than they fear Him. This, "*because they are devoid of understanding.*" (Verse 13)

Thus the *sūrah* exposes the truth about those people, and adds another general truth. Now, the *sūrah* goes on to describe a condition particular to the two parties, the hypocrites and the unbelievers among the people of earlier religions. This condition arises from the fact that they fear the believers more than they fear God: "*They will never fight you even in a body except from within fortified strongholds or from behind walls. Strong is their internal hostility. You may think that they are united when in fact*

their hearts are at odds with one another, because they are people who will not use their reason." (Verse 14)

Time continues to reveal the absolute accuracy of this delineation of the true character of the hypocrites and the people of earlier revelations whenever and wherever they meet the believers in battle. Recent clashes in the Holy Land between volunteer believers and the Jews have confirmed the accuracy of this description. They would not fight the believers except in their own fortified settlements in Palestine.[6] Whenever they were exposed, they scuttled away like rats. It is almost as if this verse was referring to what happened recently. All glory belongs to God, the All-Knowing, the All-Aware.

The verse adds other features of their mentality: "*Strong is their internal hostility. You may think that they are united when in fact their hearts are at odds with one another.*" (Verse 14) This picture contrasts with that of the believers who are united by the bond of faith across all generations and whose brotherhood transcends barriers of time, place, race, country and tribe. The hypocrites and unbelievers conversely are in disarray "*because they are people who will not use their reason.*" (Verse 14)

Appearances may at times be deceptive so as to give us an impression that the unbelievers among the people of earlier revelations stand in solid alliance, supporting one another. We may also see the hypocrites closing ranks in one group. However, we are told their true condition by God Himself who says that they are not truly so; it is all deception. This cover is lifted at times to reveal the truth of God's description, exposing conflicts within the same alliance, because those allies have different interests, preferences and directions. Never have the believers been true to their faith without seeing the opposite party revealing such differences and conflicts. The believers need only be determined, show perseverance in adversity, and they will inevitably see that the bonds uniting those followers of falsehood disappear to show their acute differences; this then leads them to scheme against each other.

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6. The author is referring here to the battles that took place in 1948, when groups of Islamic volunteers took part in the war, trying to prevent the establishment of the state of Israel. The Jewish fighters did not fear the Arab armies as much as they feared those volunteers. – Editor's note.

The hypocrites and the unbelievers from among the people of earlier revelations are able to gain the upper hand against the Muslims when the Muslims are disunited. In this way, the Muslims no longer reflect the true conditions of believers as outlined earlier in the *sūrah*. Otherwise, the hypocrites and unbelievers are too weak to be able to gain mastery over believers. Besides, they have different leanings and interests: "*Strong is their internal hostility. You may think that they are united when in fact their hearts are at odds with one another.*" (Verse 14)

The Qur'ān wants this fact to be firmly settled in believers' minds so that they know the truth about their enemies and do not stand in awe of them. It thus seeks to influence their feelings and morale on the basis of established fact. When Muslims take the Qur'ān seriously, they think little of their enemies, who are God's own enemies. They stand united, in one line. When they do so, no worldly power can match them.

Those who believe in God must know the truth about themselves and their enemies. This is half the battle. The Qur'ān puts this truth to them in the context of an event that has already taken place, enlightening them about the true factors that were at play and explaining what it signified and the facts to which it pointed. This explanation was useful to those who witnessed that event as it unfolded. It should provide great enlightenment to future generations who should reflect on it and learn the truth from the One who knows all truth.

In Satan's Footsteps

This evacuation of the al-Naḍīr from Madīnah was not the first of its kind. It was preceded by the evacuation of the Qaynuqā' tribe, to which the following verse most probably refers:

> *Like those who, a short while before them, had to taste the evil that came from their own doings. Painful suffering is in store for them.* (Verse 15)

The encounter with the Jewish tribe of Qaynuqā' took place after the Battle of Badr, but before the Battle of Uḥud. The Qaynuqā' were bound by a treaty with the Prophet and the Muslims. When the Muslims won a great victory against the unbelievers in Badr, the Jews

were upset and harboured a grudge against the Muslims. They feared that their position in Madīnah would be weakened while the position of the Muslims would be strengthened. The Prophet got wind of what they were whispering to one another and learnt of their ill intentions. He reminded them of the treaty he had signed with them and warned them that their attitude might augur ill. They replied rudely to him, saying: "Muḥammad! Do not think too highly of your power. You have only encountered a group who knew little about fighting a war and you managed to score a victory against them. Should you engage us in battle, you will certainly know that we are true fighters."

They followed this with repeated provocations against the Muslims. Reports mention that a Muslim woman took some merchandise to sell at the Qaynuqā' market place, and sat close to a jeweller's shop. People there tried to get her to lift her head covering, but she refused. The jeweller held the edge of her dress and fixed it behind her back while she was unaware. When she rose, the lower part of her body was exposed. The Jews around laughed at her, while she cried out in shame. A Muslim was near by and he immediately attacked the jeweller and killed him. The Jews rushed to the Muslim and killed him. The family of the Muslim who was killed appealed to other Muslims for help, and the Muslim community was in anger. Tension rose and there was a confrontation between the Muslim community and the Jewish Qaynuqā' tribe.

The Prophet laid siege to the Qaynuqā' Jews until they gave up and declared that they would accept the Prophet's ruling. 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy ibn Salūl, the chief of the hypocrites, argued with the Prophet on their behalf, citing the fact that for long they were allies of the al-Khazraj Anṣārī tribe. His true motive, however, was the strong bond between the hypocrites and the unbelievers among the people of earlier religions. The Prophet accepted his pleas and allowed them to leave Madīnah, taking with them all their property, except for arms. They left for Syria.

It is to this encounter that the *sūrah* refers. It cites it as a comparable case to that of the al-Naḍīr and the true facts behind the attitude they took towards the Muslim community and the reality of their collaboration with the hypocrites.

The *sūrah* also refers to how the hypocrites tried hard to persuade their brethren unbelievers, the Jews of al-Naḍīr, to put up stiff resistance, and

thus led them to their miserable fate. It compares this to a permanent situation in which Satan always lets down anyone who responds to his persuasion and disbelieves in God. Thus both end up in the worst of all situations:

> *Like Satan, who says to man, 'Reject the faith!' Yet when man disbelieves, Satan says, 'I here and now disown you. I fear God, the Lord of all the worlds.' Both will end up in the fire, where they will abide. Such is the reward of the wrongdoers.* (Verses 16–17)

Satan's role with any human being who responds to his promptings, as described in these verses, is in line with his nature and the aim he defined for himself. It is most singular for any human being to listen to him when he is out to trick them and lead them to their ruin. Yet this is the permanent truth which the *sūrah* states as its discussion of the event progresses further. It thus links the individual event with this permanent truth, setting it in real context. The Qur'ān does not state abstract theories, true as these may be, because a truth stated in an abstract setting does not influence hearts, feelings and minds. This is the difference between the Qur'ānic method that seeks to involve people's hearts and the methods followed by philosophers and those engaged in research.

Thus the *sūrah* completes its discussion of the al-Naḍīr, having put into it a large number of images, facts and directives, linking its local events to great and permanent facts. The *sūrah* thus represents a journey taking us far into the real world and into the world of human conscience. It goes far beyond the event itself. Its reporting in God's book is so different from the way it is reported in books written by human beings. The difference is as immeasurable as the difference between anything of man's making and what God makes.

Two Unequal Groups

The *sūrah* now addresses the believers, calling them by the quality they love best, distinguishing them from all others and making it easy for them to be positive. They are called upon to remain God-fearing, to

take stock of what they prepare for their life to come, to be always alert and make sure that they do not follow in the footsteps of those earlier people who forgot God. The believers have already seen the fate that befell some of these who are destined for the fire of hell:

> *Believers, have fear of God. Let every soul consider carefully what it sends ahead for tomorrow. Remain God-fearing, for God is fully aware of all that you do. Be not like those who forget God, so God causes them to forget their own souls. They are the transgressors. Not equal are the ones destined for the fire and the ones destined for paradise. Those who are destined for paradise are indeed the ones who will triumph.* (Verses 18–20)

Such fear of God is a mental state that words cannot fully describe. It is a condition that makes the human heart alert, feeling God's presence at every moment. It keeps man always on the watch, fearing that God may see him in a condition that displeases Him. A believer knows that God's eye watches everyone and every heart at every moment. How and when can man be in a situation that God does not see?

"*Let every soul consider carefully what it sends ahead for tomorrow.*" (Verse 18) Again, this is a statement that means far more than the total sum of its words. The mere thought of it places before a man's heart the record of all actions he did throughout his life. He looks carefully at every line, adding up his total sum after looking at every detail. When he has done so, he knows what he has sent ahead of him for his future life. This alerts him to his weaknesses and shortcomings, even though he has done much good. How would he feel if his net balance shows little in the way of good actions? This is bound to keep the human heart always awake, looking always for ways and means to improve its record of good deeds.

This verse, which excites all these feelings among believers, adds further notes to increase their sensitivity and strengthen their feelings of awe as they look at their position with God: "*Remain God-fearing, for God is fully aware of all that you do.*" (Verse 18)

The next verse warns them against a totally different situation: "*Be not like those who forget God, so God causes them to forget their own souls.*"

(Verse 19) This is a very strange situation, but a true one. Anyone who forgets God will remain in this present life without a bond that pulls him towards a higher horizon. He lives without a goal that gives his life a meaning higher than that of grazing cattle. In such a situation man becomes oblivious of his own humanity. This fact leads to another whereby such a person forgets his own soul. He makes no preparation for his next life, which is long-lasting, permanent. He does not take account of it when he looks at the balance of his deeds. "*They are the transgressors.*" (Verse 19)

The following verse states that such people are the dwellers of the fire. It advises the believers to take a route different from theirs. After all, the believers are the ones going to heaven and their route is bound to be different: "*Not equal are the ones destined for the fire and the ones destined for paradise. Those who are destined for paradise are indeed the ones who will triumph.*" (Verse 20)

The two groups are different in nature, condition, way of life, direction and destiny. They are set on two different courses, which cannot meet in line, feature, plan, strategy or method of action. They cannot be in the same camp, neither in this present life nor in the future one. "*Those who are destined for paradise are indeed the ones who will triumph.*" (Verse 20) Thus their fate is clearly stated, but that of the ones destined for the fire of hell is not even mentioned. It is too well known to deserve mention.

The Influence of the Qur'ān

The *sūrah* now adds a powerful note that shakes hearts to the core. It portrays what effect the Qur'ān would have had on solid rocks had it been so sent down:

> *Had We brought down this Qur'ān upon a mountain, you would have seen it humble itself and break asunder for fear of God. We put such images before people so that they may reflect.* (Verse 21)

This image reflects the truth. This Qur'ān has such weight, power and shaking influence that is absolutely irresistible when we receive it

as it truly is. 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb had such an experience when he overheard a reciter reading the opening of *Sūrah* 52: "*By Mount Sinai; by a scripture inscribed on unrolled parchment; by the much-visited House; by the vault raised high; by the swelling sea; your Lord's punishment will indeed come to pass. Nothing can stop it...*" (52: 1–8) As he listened, he leaned on a wall nearby. He then went back home and felt ill. People kept visiting him for a month, enquiring after his health.

The moments when a person is fully receptive of some truth contained in the Qur'ān will see him shake and shudder. He will experience such changes that are best represented in the physical world by the effects of magnetism and electricity or even stronger. God, the Creator of the mountains who bestowed the Qur'ān from on high, says: "*Had We brought down this Qur'ān upon a mountain, you would have seen it humble itself and break asunder for fear of God.*" (Verse 21) Anyone who has had some experience of the Qur'ān touching their inner souls will appreciate this truth in a way that cannot be otherwise expressed. "*We put such images before people so that they may reflect.*" (Verse 21) Such an image should keep hearts thinking and reflecting.

God's Attributes

The rest of the *sūrah* is devoted to a long glorification of God, citing a number of His names and attributes. This serves as an aspect of the influence of the Qur'ān on the universe. It is as if we see the universe as a person expressing this glorification with his mouth, and a vast kingdom echoing it in every corner. These attributes of God have clear effects on the very nature of the universe, its phenomena and interactions. As it offers this glorification, it testifies to the truth of these attributes and their effects:

> *He is God: there is no deity other than Him. It is He who knows all that is beyond the reach of anyone's perception, as well as all that which can be witnessed. He is the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful. He is God: there is no deity other than Him, the Sovereign, the Holy, the Source of Peace, the Giver of Faith, the Guardian over all, the Almighty, the Compeller, to whom all greatness belongs. Exalted is God in His limitless*

> *glory above anything they associate as partner with Him. He is God: the Creator, the Maker who gives shape and form to all. His are the most gracious names. Everything in the heavens and earth extols His limitless glory. He alone is the Almighty, the Wise.* (Verses 22–24)

It is an expansive glorification that puts together a number of God's glorious attributes. It consists of three parts, with each beginning with God's oneness in the form of either, "*He is God: there is no deity other than Him,*" or, "*He is God,*" on its own. Each one of these most gracious names or attributes has its clear bearing on the universe and a felt influence on human life. Thus they bring home to the human heart their effect on life and the living. They are not negative attributes. Nor are they isolated from the universe, its situations, phenomena and events.

"*He is God: there is no deity other than Him.*" This imprints on our consciousness the truth of God's oneness in belief, worship, action and life conduct from the beginning of creation to its final end. On the basis of this oneness a whole code of living is based, regulating our way of thinking, feeling, behaviour, relations with the universe and its living creatures, as well as relations with people.

"*It is He who knows all that is beyond the reach of anyone's perception, as well as all that which can be witnessed.*" (Verse 22) This divine attribute makes us clearly conscious of God's knowledge of everything, apparent or hidden. This awakes in our consciences the need to watch out, keeping God always in our thoughts, public and private. Thus, man will go about his life feeling that he is being watched by God and that he himself is on the watch for God's sake, realizing that he does not live alone, not even when he is in seclusion or locked alone with one other in private conversation. His actions will be coloured by this feeling that keeps him always on guard.

"*He is the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.*" (Verse 22) Now a feeling of reassurance spreads within man's conscience as he feels the air of God's mercy spread over him. Feelings of awe and hope, fear and reassurance are well balanced within him. In the believer's concept, God does not chase His creatures, but watches them; He does not wish them harm, but loves that they should adhere to His guidance; He does not abandon them to struggle against evil without providing help for them.

"*He is God: there is no deity other than Him.*" (Verse 23) This is repeated at the beginning of the second part of this expansive glorification of God, because it provides the basis for all divine attributes.

"*The Sovereign.*" (Verse 23) This attribute imprints on our hearts the truth that there is no sovereignty or dominion to anyone other than God who has no partners. When there is one sovereign, those who are subject to that sovereignty will have only one master to serve. No one can serve two masters at the same time: "*Never has God put two hearts in one man's body.*" (33: 4)

"*The Holy.*" (Verse 23) This attribute radiates absolute holiness and purity. It strikes our hearts with purity, keeps them cleansed, suited to receive the grace of the Holy Sovereign, and all to extol His limitless glory.

"*The Source of Peace.*" (Verse 23) Again, this attribute radiates peace, security and reassurance throughout the universe and in man's own soul. Man feels that he is safe, under God's care and protection, in peace with the world around him and all its dwellers. As man reflects on this attribute, he is reassured, regaining a feeling of peace and extending peace to all.

"*The Giver of Faith.*" (Verse 23) The very pronunciation of this attribute, *al-Mu'min*, gives a believer a clear sense of the value of faith. Here, a believer meets with God and draws on one of His attributes, rising by virtue of his faith to join the community on high.

"*The Guardian over all.*" (Verse 23) This begins a new set of attributes that contribute to our concept of Him. The previous attributes related to Him only. These new ones relate to His action as He conducts life, the universe and all affairs. These attributes imply His absolute control and watchfulness.

The same applies to the other three attributes stated in this verse, "*The Almighty, the Compeller, to whom all greatness belongs.*" (Verse 23) They all emphasize power, authority and superiority. None is more powerful or has greater authority than Him, just as no one can be in any way superior to Him. These attributes belong to God alone; none share them with Him in any way. Hence the verse ends with the statement: "*Exalted is God in His limitless glory above anything they associate as partner with Him.*" (Verse 23)

The last verse of the *sūrah* begins the third section of this expansive glorification of God, and again it begins with a statement of His oneness: "*He is God.*" (Verse 24) Whoever else is not God. He is "*the Creator, the Maker.*" The Creator stresses design and proportion, while the Maker stresses the process of bringing things into reality. The two attributes are intertwined, and the difference between them is subtle. "*Who gives shape and form to all.*" (Verse 24) This attribute is also closely related to the two before it. It means that God is the One who gives every creature its distinctive features and specific qualities that make up its personality.

The succession of these interlinked qualities, with their subtle differences, prompts us to follow the process of creation and initiation, stage by stage, as we humans conceive of it. In actual fact, there are no stages or steps. What we know of these attributes is not their absolute reality, because this is known only to God. We only know some of the effects they produce, as this is the limit of our understanding.

"*His are the most gracious names.*" (Verse 24) His names are, in themselves, most gracious. They need not be praised or admired by creatures. The Arabic adjective *al-ḥusnā*, translated here as '*the most gracious*', also means 'beautiful, attractive, etc.' They are the attributes a believer reflects upon in order to mould himself and his life in accordance with their meaning. He knows that God loves that he should try to live up to them so that he can elevate himself as He seeks God's acceptance.

This long and expansive glorification of God, citing many of His most gracious attributes, with all their inspiring effects, is brought to a close with the image that God's glorification is echoed throughout the universe, with every creature joining in: "*Everything in the heavens and earth extols His limitless glory. He alone is the Almighty, the Wise.*" (Verse 24) This is the most suitable and expected of images after the mentioning of all God's attributes. Thus the human heart joins in with all creatures and living things in a glorification that brings the opening of the *sūrah* and its ending into perfect harmony.

SŪRAH 60

Al-Mumtaḥanah

(Women Tested)

Prologue

The present *sūrah* provides yet another episode in the cultivation of the Muslim community, its social organization and state building during the Madīnah period. It thus forms a link in the chain that is the divine system, a system laid down for the community chosen to implement it in society. With such a well-defined and distinctive system humanity would be able to strive to achieve its goals, but there would be times when its efforts would fall short of what is required. Nonetheless, humanity would always look up to it, aiming to mirror that ideal form when the first Muslim community put it into practice.

This objective required, as we have stated on more than one occasion, long preparations each involving different stages. The events that happened within or around the Muslim community provided some of the material necessary for such preparations. While the events themselves were determined according to God's knowledge, they also provided the context for their explanation and interpretation, as also for comments and directives.

In the midst of all these events, the process of building the characters of the people who undertook the task of implementing the Islamic system was completed. Thus, in its formative stage, the Muslim community separated itself from the rest of society insofar as it needed

to remain pure, free of any alien aspect. Furthermore, it should also be acknowledged that this distinctive concept of faith, Islam, represented something new, unknown anywhere else in the world, and especially not in Arabia. All this, however, did not mean that Islam isolated itself from events occurring in the larger society. Indeed the Muslims were part of these events, interacting with them as they took place. This process of interaction also meant that they might be repeatedly influenced, and in different ways, by the same event. God, who created those people, knew that they do not all respond in the same way to the first touch, and that they might need more than one such touch for a certain effect to settle in. He also knew that remnants of the past, natural attractions and tendencies, human weaknesses, practical considerations, as well as old habits and traditions might represent obstacles that could hinder the process of cultivation. To overcome such difficulties necessitated repeated reminders. Events took place in succession, as determined by God's will, providing the required admonition and the basis for issuing warnings and directives.

Sharp, alert and blessed with keen insight, the Prophet used such events and occasions wisely, at every turn, to help this process of character cultivation. He was supported in this process by revelations that directed and endorsed what he did to mould that first Muslim community.

The Process of Cultivation

This *sūrah* represents a stage in that long process of cultivation aiming to establish within the conscience of every Muslim a pure world, with faith as the pivot around which it turns. In this world, Muslims congregate around this axis of faith, having only one unseverable bond. They purge their hearts of all ties of nationality, race, country, clan or family, replacing them all with the single bond of belief in God and being members of God's party.

The world Islam wants to build is both divine and human: it is divine in the sense that it derives all its principles and values from God's directives and wisdom, and addresses all its actions to God hoping to earn His pleasure. It is human in the sense that it encompasses all humanity within the broad scope of faith. Hence, in such a world the barriers of

race, country, language, family and all that separates one person from another are removed to leave only the tie of faith. Such is the noble world that is worthy of man, a creature God has honoured, breathing of His spirit into him.

Obstacles hindering the building of such a world were numerous in the Arabian environment, as also in our world today. Attachments to family, clan, race and land accounted for some of these obstacles. Others included personal leanings and desires, such as selfishness, pride, greed, psychological preferences and prejudices, as well as many other elements that work on man's mind. Islam needed to deal with all this in the community that had been chosen to implement the divine system and provide a practical example of it. This *sūrah,* then, is a step in that long process.

Some of the Muslims who migrated to Madīnah, leaving their possessions, homes and families behind for the sake of their faith continued to feel some attachment to those they had left behind in Makkah, specifically, for example, their spouses and offspring. Furthermore, despite all the persecution they had suffered at the hands of the Makkans, some Muslims still wished for a reconciliation that would see an end to fighting against relatives and family members.

On the other hand, God wanted to purge their hearts of all these bonds, so that they dedicated themselves to His faith and the system He wanted implemented. God knew the heavy pressures of natural tendencies and old practices on people. Indeed, the Arabs valued the ties of family, clan and tribe more strongly than any other community. Therefore, the Qur'ān continued to administer its effective treatment through events and comments on those events. Thus, the treatment would be administered on the stage of reality, just at the appropriate moment.

Treasonable Action

Reports mention a particular incident that led to the revelation of the first part of the present *sūrah.* This may be so, with the incident providing the immediate reason for such revelation, but Qur'ānic texts always go much further than particular events.

Ḥāṭib ibn Abū Balta'ah was one of the Muhājirīn who migrated with the Prophet from Makkah to Madīnah and was one of those who took part in the Battle of Badr. He had children and property he had left behind in Makkah. He did not belong to the Quraysh, but was an ally of 'Uthmān. When the Prophet decided to march to Makkah after its people were in breach of the peace treaty he had concluded with them two years earlier, he ordered his Companions to get ready. He prayed to God that the Quraysh would remain unaware of his intentions. He did, however, tell some of his Companions what he was planning to do; Ḥāṭib was among those. Ḥāṭib then wrote a letter to the Quraysh warning them that the Prophet intended to mount an attack against them. He gave it to a woman who concealed it and managed to leave Madīnah without being detected by any of the guards appointed by the Prophet on all exits and entrances. By so doing, Ḥāṭib hoped the Quraysh would consider his action as a favour and so not harm his family. The Prophet was informed by God of Ḥāṭib's action. He therefore sent chasers to retrieve the letter from that woman.

Al-Bukhārī relates on the authority of 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib: "God's Messenger sent me and al-Zubayr ibn al-'Awwām, on horseback, telling us to go as far as a place called Rawḍat Khākh, where we would find a woman unbeliever carrying a letter written by Ḥāṭib ibn Abī Balta'ah to the unbelievers, which we were to retrieve. We caught up with her as she was riding her camel. We asked her to give us the letter, but she denied having any such thing. We sat her camel down and tried to find the letter but we could see none. We said to her: 'We swear by God, the Prophet has not lied. You will either do as we tell you and give us the letter or we will undress you.' She realized that we were serious and that she had no option but to comply. She undid her hair, which was covered and took the letter out. She gave it to us and we went straight back to Madīnah to hand it to the Prophet."

The Prophet called Ḥāṭib in and questioned him about what he had done. Ḥāṭib appealed to the Prophet not to jump to any conclusions. He said: "I am certainly a believer in God and His Messenger. I have not changed at all. It is not that I have any doubts in matters of faith. I only thought of doing the Quraysh a favour by which God would protect my children and family. All your Companions who have families

or property in Makkah have relatives and clans there to whom God provides protection."

The Prophet recognized that Ḥāṭib was telling the truth. He said to those around him: "What he has told you is certainly the truth. Therefore, say nothing but good about him." 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb said to the Prophet: "He has betrayed God, His Messenger and the believers. Allow me to behead this hypocrite." The Prophet said to him: "Was he not one of the people who fought the Battle of Badr? How would you know, 'Umar, that God has not looked at the soldiers of Badr and said to them: I have forgiven you whatever you will do?" Tears sprang to 'Umar's eyes as he said: "God and His Messenger know better."

Al-Bukhārī adds in another version of this story that the present *sūrah* was revealed in connection with this event. In a third version he says that the Prophet sent three men, the other being al-Miqdād, to retrieve the letter.

Lessons Derived

To reflect a little on this event and its consequences does not go beyond our purpose of looking at how the Qur'ān uses events to cultivate the Muslim community and refine its attitudes through both the Prophet and Qur'ānic instructions and commentaries.

The first thing to look at is the deed itself done by Ḥāṭib, an early Muslim who belonged to the elite of the Muhājirīn and one of the few who were informed by the Prophet of the objective behind his intended campaign. The event shows us how the human soul may experience moments of weakness, no matter how strong it may be in its faith. Only God can protect us from such moments.

Then we see the Prophet's great attitude through it all, waiting to establish the facts before coming to any conclusion. He patiently questioned Ḥāṭib about his motives. We see the sympathy for his Companion in his moment of weakness, realizing that he told the truth. Therefore, he stopped his Companions from having a go at him, telling them: "What he has told you is certainly the truth. Therefore, say nothing but good about him." Thus he helped him to rise after he had slipped. He did not allow anyone to taunt him. By contrast, we see

'Umar's seriousness in such a matter as he said to the Prophet: "He has betrayed God, His Messenger and the believers. Allow me to behead this hypocrite." 'Umar looked at the deed itself and his reaction reflects his uncompromising attitude. The Prophet, on the other hand, looked at it from a broader perspective, with his thorough understanding of human nature. His sympathy was that of a caring educator, with profound and comprehensive knowledge, looking at all circumstances.

We also need to reflect a little on Ḥāṭib's own words explaining his momentary weakness, even though his concept of God's will and the factors at play in worldly matters was perfectly sound. He said to the Prophet: "I only thought of doing the Quraysh a favour by which God would protect my children and family..." Thus, he knew that it is God who protects, not the favour he wanted to do the Quraysh. This is confirmed in the remainder of his explanation: "All your Companions who have families or property in Makkah have relatives and clans there to whom God provides protection." We see how he maintained that it is God who protects, not relatives or clans. They are merely the tools by which God's purpose may be done.

Perhaps the Prophet's reaction took this right concept into account. Perhaps he realized that Ḥāṭib was telling the truth. Hence, what he said to his Companions required them only to say good words to Ḥāṭib.

Another point of reflection looks at God's will as this event unfolds. Ḥāṭib was one of the few people who knew from the Prophet the true goal behind this campaign, yet here we see a moment of weakness affect one of these select few. Then, God's will ensured that this moment of weakness had no adverse consequences for the Muslims. It is as if the whole purpose was to unravel this weakness and treat it. None of the Prophet's other Companions who had not been informed of the Prophet's secret objective tried to exploit this moment, pressing their own claims of being more worthy of trust. This reflected the Muslims' attitude towards their leadership, and their own humility, as well as their desire to learn the lesson of what had happened to their brother.

The event itself is related in confirmed and authentic *aḥādīth*. As for its being the direct cause of the revelation of these verses, this is mentioned in one of the versions related by al-Bukhārī. We do not exclude the possibility that this report is accurate. However, the significance of

the Qur'ānic texts goes much further than this individual case. These Qur'ānic verses deal with a psychological situation that could affect anyone. They follow the Qur'ānic method of using a particular event to press home certain instructions and directives.

The Qur'ān deals here with the question of close relations, narrow affiliations, as well as adherence to what is familiar and what one generation inherits from another. It wants to instil new bonds, values and standards into believers as well as a new outlook on the universe, life, man, their role as believers and the purpose for human existence. It was, in effect, bringing together these new plants, the believers, under God's care so that He could teach and enlighten them about their existence and role. It wanted to open their eyes to the hostilities around them and to the schemes of their enemies. God wanted them to feel that they belonged to Him, making up His party, and that He wanted them to bring about something He willed to happen. They were to be marked out as His, known among all communities as His own, both in this life and in the life to come. Let them, then, dedicate themselves to His cause, maintaining no ties other than His.

The *sūrah* in its entirety moves in this direction. Even the legislative verses at the end, which speak about how believing women who migrate to join the Muslim community should be treated, the pledge of loyalty given by women who accept Islam, separating women believers from their husbands who are not Muslim, and relations between male believers and their wives who reject the faith, all lay down regulations in line with that general direction.

The *sūrah* concludes in the same way as it started, ordering the believers not to make God's enemies, whether idolaters or Jews, their intimate friends. This ensures that the separation between believers and unbelievers is complete, and that all ties except that of faith, are abandoned.

Al-Mumtaḥanah
(Women Tested)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسۡمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحۡمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

Believers! Do not take My enemies, who are your enemies as well, for your friends, showing them affection when they have rejected the truth you have received, and have driven the Messenger and yourselves out only because you believe in God, your Lord. If you have left your homes to strive in My cause and to seek My pleasure, then do not secretly lean towards them with affection. I well know all that you conceal and all that you reveal. Whoever of you does this has already strayed from the right path. (1)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ لَا تَتَّخِذُواْ عَدُوِّى
وَعَدُوَّكُمۡ أَوۡلِيَآءَ تُلۡقُونَ إِلَيۡهِم بِٱلۡمَوَدَّةِ
وَقَدۡ كَفَرُواْ بِمَا جَآءَكُم مِّنَ ٱلۡحَقِّ يُخۡرِجُونَ
ٱلرَّسُولَ وَإِيَّاكُمۡ أَن تُؤۡمِنُواْ بِٱللَّهِ رَبِّكُمۡ
إِن كُنتُمۡ خَرَجۡتُمۡ جِهَٰدٗا فِي سَبِيلِي
وَٱبۡتِغَآءَ مَرۡضَاتِيۚ تُسِرُّونَ إِلَيۡهِم بِٱلۡمَوَدَّةِ
وَأَنَا۠ أَعۡلَمُ بِمَآ أَخۡفَيۡتُمۡ وَمَآ أَعۡلَنتُمۡۚ وَمَن
يَفۡعَلۡهُ مِنكُمۡ فَقَدۡ ضَلَّ سَوَآءَ
ٱلسَّبِيلِ ١

If they get the better of you, they will remain your enemies and stretch out their hands and tongues to you with evil. They dearly wish to see you unbelievers. (2)

إِن يَثۡقَفُوكُمۡ يَكُونُواْ لَكُمۡ أَعۡدَآءٗ وَيَبۡسُطُوٓاْ
إِلَيۡكُمۡ أَيۡدِيَهُمۡ وَأَلۡسِنَتَهُم بِٱلسُّوٓءِ وَوَدُّواْ
لَوۡ تَكۡفُرُونَ ٢

Neither your kinsfolk nor your own children will be of any benefit to you. On the Day of Resurrection He will decide between you. God sees all that you do. (3)

لَن تَنفَعَكُمۡ أَرۡحَامُكُمۡ وَلَآ أَوۡلَٰدُكُمۡۚ
يَوۡمَ ٱلۡقِيَٰمَةِ يَفۡصِلُ بَيۡنَكُمۡۚ وَٱللَّهُ
بِمَا تَعۡمَلُونَ بَصِيرٞ ٣

You have a good example in Abraham and those who followed him, when they said to their people: 'We disown you and what you worship instead of God. We reject you. The enmity and hate that have arisen between us and you will last until you believe in God alone.' The only exception was Abraham, when he said to his father, 'I shall pray for forgiveness for you, although it is not in my power to be of any avail to you against God.' 'Our Lord! In You we have placed our trust, and to You do we turn, and with You is the final destination. (4)

قَدْ كَانَتْ لَكُمْ أُسْوَةٌ حَسَنَةٌ فِىٓ إِبْرَٰهِيمَ وَٱلَّذِينَ مَعَهُۥٓ إِذْ قَالُوا۟ لِقَوْمِهِمْ إِنَّا بُرَءَٰٓؤُا۟ مِنكُمْ وَمِمَّا تَعْبُدُونَ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ كَفَرْنَا بِكُمْ وَبَدَا بَيْنَنَا وَبَيْنَكُمُ ٱلْعَدَٰوَةُ وَٱلْبَغْضَآءُ أَبَدًا حَتَّىٰ تُؤْمِنُوا۟ بِٱللَّهِ وَحْدَهُۥٓ إِلَّا قَوْلَ إِبْرَٰهِيمَ لِأَبِيهِ لَأَسْتَغْفِرَنَّ لَكَ وَمَآ أَمْلِكُ لَكَ مِنَ ٱللَّهِ مِن شَىْءٍ ۖ رَّبَّنَا عَلَيْكَ تَوَكَّلْنَا وَإِلَيْكَ أَنَبْنَا وَإِلَيْكَ ٱلْمَصِيرُ ﴿٤﴾

Our Lord! Do not make of us a test for the unbelievers. Forgive us, Lord. You are the Almighty, the Wise.' (5)

رَبَّنَا لَا تَجْعَلْنَا فِتْنَةً لِّلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ وَٱغْفِرْ لَنَا رَبَّنَآ ۖ إِنَّكَ أَنتَ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلْحَكِيمُ ﴿٥﴾

In them, indeed, you have a good example for everyone who looks forward with hope to God and the Last Day. Anyone who turns away should remember that God is truly self-sufficient, worthy of all praise. (6)

لَقَدْ كَانَ لَكُمْ فِيهِمْ أُسْوَةٌ حَسَنَةٌ لِّمَن كَانَ يَرْجُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ وَٱلْيَوْمَ ٱلْءَاخِرَ ۚ وَمَن يَتَوَلَّ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ هُوَ ٱلْغَنِىُّ ٱلْحَمِيدُ ﴿٦﴾

It may well be that God will bring about affection between you and those who are now your enemies. God is all powerful; God is much forgiving, ever merciful. (7)

عَسَى ٱللَّهُ أَن يَجْعَلَ بَيْنَكُمْ وَبَيْنَ ٱلَّذِينَ عَادَيْتُم مِّنْهُم مَّوَدَّةً ۚ وَٱللَّهُ قَدِيرٌ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿٧﴾

God does not forbid you to deal kindly and with full equity with those who do not fight you on account of your faith, nor drive you out of your homes. God loves those who behave equitably. (8)

لَّا يَنْهَىٰكُمُ ٱللَّهُ عَنِ ٱلَّذِينَ لَمْ يُقَٰتِلُوكُمْ فِى ٱلدِّينِ وَلَمْ يُخْرِجُوكُم مِّن دِيَٰرِكُمْ أَن تَبَرُّوهُمْ وَتُقْسِطُوٓا۟ إِلَيْهِمْ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يُحِبُّ ٱلْمُقْسِطِينَ ﴿٨﴾

God only forbids you to turn in friendship towards those who fight against you because of your faith, and drive you from your homes, and help others to drive you out. Those of you who turn towards them in friendship are indeed wrongdoers. (9)

إِنَّمَا يَنْهَىٰكُمُ ٱللَّهُ عَنِ ٱلَّذِينَ قَٰتَلُوكُمْ فِى ٱلدِّينِ وَأَخْرَجُوكُم مِّن دِيَٰرِكُمْ وَظَٰهَرُوا۟ عَلَىٰٓ إِخْرَاجِكُمْ أَن تَوَلَّوْهُمْ ۚ وَمَن يَتَوَلَّهُمْ فَأُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلظَّٰلِمُونَ ﴿٩﴾

Believers! When believing women come to you as migrants, test them. God knows best their faith. If you ascertain that they are believers, do not send them back to the unbelievers. They are no longer lawful [as wives] for the unbelievers, and these are no longer lawful to them. None the less, hand back to the unbelievers the dowries they have paid them. It is no offence for you to marry them after giving them their dowries. Do not hold on to marriage ties with unbelieving women. Ask for repayment of the dowries you have paid, just as they have the right to ask for repayment of their dowries. Such is God's judgement. He judges between you in equity. God is all-knowing, wise. (10)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓا۟ إِذَا جَآءَكُمُ ٱلْمُؤْمِنَٰتُ مُهَٰجِرَٰتٍ فَٱمْتَحِنُوهُنَّ ۖ ٱللَّهُ أَعْلَمُ بِإِيمَٰنِهِنَّ ۖ فَإِنْ عَلِمْتُمُوهُنَّ مُؤْمِنَٰتٍ فَلَا تَرْجِعُوهُنَّ إِلَى ٱلْكُفَّارِ ۖ لَا هُنَّ حِلٌّ لَّهُمْ وَلَا هُمْ يَحِلُّونَ لَهُنَّ ۖ وَءَاتُوهُم مَّآ أَنفَقُوا۟ ۚ وَلَا جُنَاحَ عَلَيْكُمْ أَن تَنكِحُوهُنَّ إِذَآ ءَاتَيْتُمُوهُنَّ أُجُورَهُنَّ ۚ وَلَا تُمْسِكُوا۟ بِعِصَمِ ٱلْكَوَافِرِ وَسْـَٔلُوا۟ مَآ أَنفَقْتُمْ وَلْيَسْـَٔلُوا۟ مَآ أَنفَقُوا۟ ۚ ذَٰلِكُمْ حُكْمُ ٱللَّهِ ۖ يَحْكُمُ بَيْنَكُمْ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ عَلِيمٌ حَكِيمٌ ﴿١٠﴾

Should any of your wives go over to the unbelievers and you subsequently acquire gains from them, then pay those whose wives have gone away the equivalent of whatever dowry they had paid. Fear God, in whom you believe. (11)

وَإِن فَاتَكُمْ شَيْءٌ مِّنْ أَزْوَٰجِكُمْ إِلَى ٱلْكُفَّارِ فَعَاقَبْتُمْ فَـَٔاتُوا۟ ٱلَّذِينَ ذَهَبَتْ أَزْوَٰجُهُم مِّثْلَ مَآ أَنفَقُوا۟ ۚ وَٱتَّقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ ٱلَّذِىٓ أَنتُم بِهِۦ مُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿١١﴾

Prophet! When believing women come and pledge to you that they will not associate any partner with God, nor steal, nor commit adultery, nor kill their children, nor lie about who fathered their children, nor disobey you in anything reasonable, then accept their pledge of allegiance and pray to God to forgive them. God is most forgiving, ever merciful. (12)

يَـٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّبِىُّ إِذَا جَآءَكَ ٱلْمُؤْمِنَـٰتُ يُبَايِعْنَكَ عَلَىٰٓ أَن لَّا يُشْرِكْنَ بِٱللَّهِ شَيْـًٔا وَلَا يَسْرِقْنَ وَلَا يَزْنِينَ وَلَا يَقْتُلْنَ أَوْلَـٰدَهُنَّ وَلَا يَأْتِينَ بِبُهْتَـٰنٍ يَفْتَرِينَهُۥ بَيْنَ أَيْدِيهِنَّ وَأَرْجُلِهِنَّ وَلَا يَعْصِينَكَ فِى مَعْرُوفٍ ۙ فَبَايِعْهُنَّ وَٱسْتَغْفِرْ لَهُنَّ ٱللَّهَ ۖ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿١٢﴾

Believers! Do not take as friends any people with whom God is angry. They despair of the life to come just as the unbelievers despair of those buried in their graves. (13)

يَـٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ لَا تَتَوَلَّوْا۟ قَوْمًا غَضِبَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَيْهِمْ قَدْ يَئِسُوا۟ مِنَ ٱلْـَٔاخِرَةِ كَمَا يَئِسَ ٱلْكُفَّارُ مِنْ أَصْحَـٰبِ ٱلْقُبُورِ ﴿١٣﴾

What Friends?

> *Believers! Do not take My enemies, who are your enemies as well, for your friends, showing them affection when they have rejected the truth you have received, and have driven the Messenger and yourselves out only because you believe in God, your Lord. If you have left your homes to strive in My cause and to seek My pleasure, then do not secretly lean towards them with affection. I well know all that you conceal and all that you reveal. Whoever of you does this has already strayed from the right path. If they get the better of you, they will remain your enemies and stretch out their hands and tongues to you with evil. They dearly wish to see you unbelievers.* (Verses 1–2)

The *sūrah* begins with this friendly and inspiring address, calling on '*believers*'. It is an address by their Lord in whom they believe, who calls on them in the name of faith that establishes their bond with Him, to carefully consider their position. He also warns them against their enemies' schemes and reminds them of the task they have been assigned. In a kindly and friendly way, God makes their enemies His enemies: "*Believers! Do not take My enemies, who are your enemies as well, for your friends, showing them affection.*" (Verse 1) Thus, He makes the believers feel that they belong to Him. Whoever is hostile to them is actually hostile to Him. They are the people who bear His insignia on earth and the ones He loves. Therefore, it is inconceivable that they should show affection to those who are His and their enemies.

God reminds them of the crimes, aggression and injustice committed by those people against them, their faith and His Messenger: "*They have rejected the truth you have received, and have driven the Messenger and yourselves out only because you believe in God, your Lord.*" (Verse 1) Having committed all such injustices, what basis could there be for friendship and affection? They rejected the truth and drove the Prophet and his followers out of their homes for no other reason than that they believed in God. He reminds the believers of all this, stating in effect that it was for their faith that the unbelievers fought them, not for any other reason. The real issue of contention, i.e. faith, is brought to the fore. They were driven out of their homes for no reason other than faith.

Having thus stated the true issue of conflict, the *sūrah* reminds the believers that there is no room for intimacy between them and the unbelievers, if they have truly left their homes for God's sake, and in quest of His pleasure: "*If you have left your homes to strive in My cause and to seek My pleasure.*" (Verse 1) It is not possible for someone to migrate seeking God's pleasure and His cause to combine this with friendship with those who drove him out because of it. Such people are the enemies of God and His Messenger.

The *sūrah* then adds an implicit warning against what they conceal in their hearts of friendly feelings towards their enemies, God's enemies. He is fully aware of what hearts may secretly harbour and what they leave in the open: "*Do not secretly lean towards them with affection. I well know all that you conceal and all that you reveal.*" (Verse 1) This is followed by a fearsome warning that strikes fear in believers' hearts: "*Whoever of you does this has already strayed from the right path.*" (Verse 1) A believer fears nothing worse than going astray after he has known and followed guidance.

The threat and the warning come right in the middle of an explanation of the unbelievers' true character and their evil intentions. Further explanation follows: "*If they get the better of you, they will remain your enemies and stretch out their hands and tongues to you with evil. They dearly wish to see you unbelievers.*" (Verse 2) Whenever they have the chance to take advantage of the Muslims, they will act as open enemies, causing them whatever harm they can, verbal and physical, using every means available.

What is even worse is that "*they dearly wish to see you unbelievers.*" (Verse 2) To a believer, this is worse than any verbal or physical harm that can be done to him. To wish him to lose his most valuable treasure of faith and revert to disbelief is to be his worst enemy. A person who has tasted the sweetness of faith after being an unbeliever, who has seen its light after the darkness of unbelief, and who has experienced the reassurance and happiness generated by holding the concepts and feelings of a believer will hate to revert to disbelief, just as much as he would hate being thrown into a fire. It is only an enemy of God who wishes to see him return to the hell of unbelief after he has experienced the happiness of living in the heaven of faith. How could he tolerate

the emptiness of unbelief after he has enjoyed life in the active world of belief? The Qur'ān gradually builds up the believers' reaction against their enemies until it culminates in a true description of their dearest wish: "*they dearly wish to see you unbelievers.*" (Verse 2)

The second round makes only one comment about the strong bond of blood relations, a tie that is deeply rooted in people's hearts. It is a bond that often forces its presence in the form of warm friendliness:

> *Neither your kinsfolk nor your own children will be of any benefit to you. On the Day of Resurrection He will decide between you. God sees all that you do.* (Verse 3)

A believer works for the life to come, on which he focuses his hopes. Whatever he does in this life is merely the planting of the seeds. The harvest he awaits is in the life to come. This verse touches his heart with what happens there when all ties of blood are severed, and if the bond of faith is non-existent. This should make it easier for him to abandon such ties in the short life of this world, preferring the permanent bond that remains strong in both this life and the life to come. Hence, the *sūrah* says to the believers: "*Neither your kinsfolk nor your own children will be of any benefit to you.*" (Verse 3) These ties which you cherish, and the preservation of which forces you to befriend your's and God's enemies happened to Ḥāṭib in his eagerness to preserve his bond with his family, and as happened to others who left their relatives and children. All these ties will be of no benefit to you, because "*on the Day of Resurrection He will decide between you.*" (Verse 3) You will be separated from them, because the tie that binds people together is already severed. Belief is the only tie that counts in God's sight. "*God sees all that you do.*" (Verse 3) He is aware of the action itself and the intention behind it.

A Long Historical Relation

The third round establishes a clear link between all Muslims and the first generation of believers in God's oneness. They all join the same procession that moves across countless generations, distinguished by faith and shedding all ties except faith. They are all the same community,

starting with Abraham, who preached the first version of the pure faith. He provided an example to be followed, not only in faith but also in practice. He struggled with the bonds of kinship before he, and those with him, managed to purge their feelings of any bond other than that of faith:

> *You have a good example in Abraham and those who followed him, when they said to their people: 'We disown you and what you worship instead of God. We reject you. The enmity and hate that have arisen between us and you will last until you believe in God alone.' The only exception was Abraham, when he said to his father, 'I shall pray for forgiveness for you, although it is not in my power to be of any avail to you against God.' 'Our Lord! In You we have placed our trust, and to You do we turn, and with You is the final destination. Our Lord! Do not make of us a test for the unbelievers. Forgive us, Lord. You are the Almighty, the Wise.' In them, indeed, you have a good example for everyone who looks forward with hope to God and the Last Day. Anyone who turns away should remember that God is truly self-sufficient, worthy of all praise.* (Verses 4–6)

When a Muslim reflects on these verses, he discovers that he has a great, well-established ancestry, a long history, and an example to follow set long ago. He goes back to Abraham, not only in his faith but also in his personal experience. Thus, his experience goes beyond his own personal one and that of his generation. People in this great procession of the faithful have gone through a similar experience to what he is now facing, and they came to a certain conclusion, taking a firm decision. The question is far from new, and the requirement does not constitute a very heavy burden. Besides, should ties with relatives who are hostile to his faith be severed, he still belongs to a great community, cherishing the bond of faith with all its members. He is only a branch of a great tree with firm roots and many branches that spreads its shade wide. This tree was planted by Abraham, the first to surrender himself to God.

So, Abraham and his followers went through the same experience as the Muhājirīn, and they provide a good example: "*They said to their people: We disown you and what you worship instead of God. We reject you.*

The enmity and hate that have arisen between us and you will last until you believe in God alone." (Verse 4) Abraham and his followers made their stand clear: they dissociated themselves from their people, the deities they worshipped and their beliefs. They rejected them altogether and believed in God alone. The only feelings they had towards them were ones of enmity and hate until those people also came to believe in God alone. It was a total break that left no ties or bonds after the one of faith had been severed. This is the absolute verdict in such a situation. The example set by Abraham and his followers is good enough for every believer until the end of time.

Some Muslims, however, found a loophole enabling them to continue to maintain warm feelings towards idolatrous blood relatives. This loophole was Abraham insofar as he prayed to God to forgive his father who was an idolater. The Qur'ān explains Abraham's attitude when he promised his father that he would seek God's forgiveness for him: "*The only exception was Abraham, when he said to his father, 'I shall pray for forgiveness for you'.*" (Verse 4) Abraham said this before he was certain that his father still held stubbornly to his idolatrous beliefs. Abraham was hoping and expecting that his father would see the truth and accept the faith. In another *sūrah* we are told: "*Abraham prayed for the forgiveness of his father only because of a promise he had made to him. But when it became clear to him that he was God's enemy, he disowned him.*" (9: 114)

When Abraham assessed the situation properly, he placed the matter in God's hands, turning to Him for guidance, placing his trust completely in Him in all situations: "*Although it is not in my power to be of any avail to you against God. Our Lord! In You we have placed our trust, and to You do we turn, and with You is the final destination.*" (Verse 4) This total self-surrender to God is the essential feature of Abraham's faith placed under special focus so that his Muslim offspring properly appreciate it. Here again we see the Qur'ānic method of cultivating the Muslim community with directives based on stories and the lessons derived from them.

Therefore, the remainder of Abraham's supplication is also stated: "*Our Lord! Do not make of us a test for the unbelievers.*" (Verse 5) This prayer is an appeal to God not to give the unbelievers mastery over the believers, which would strengthen the former's rejection of true faith.

They would think that had faith provided any protection to its followers, they themselves would not have been able to subdue them. This is a confusing point, one that often surfaces when falsehood manages to gain the upper hand for a time and purpose known only to God. In such periods, tyranny is able to treat believers very badly. Good believers endure this test with patience, but this should not prevent them from praying to God to spare them such hardship that makes of them a test to others and a basis for creeping doubt.

Abraham and his group continue their supplication: "*Forgive us.*" This is said by Abraham, God's own friend, realizing that the standard of worship which is worthy of God is beyond his reach. As a human being, he cannot attain the level of worship which gives due thanks for God's favours and which sufficiently glorifies Him. Therefore, he appeals for forgiveness, setting an example for his own group and all later believers.

Concluding his prayer, Abraham addresses his Lord by His attributes that are the most suitable here: "*Lord! You are the Almighty, the Wise.*" (Verse 5)

Concluding its account of Abraham and his followers' attitude, of those who surrendered themselves to God, the *sūrah* repeats the fact that they provided a good example for all believers: "*In them, indeed, you have a good example for everyone who looks forward with hope to God and the Last Day. Anyone who turns away should remember that God is truly self-sufficient, worthy of all praise.*" (Verse 6) The example is there for those who look forward with hope to God and the Last Day. These are the ones who truly appreciate the experience that Abraham and his followers went through, and treat it as the example to follow. This, then, encourages the present generation of believers to strengthen their resolve. Anyone who abandons this way, leaving the noble procession of believers and disowns the bond with those great ancestors may do so. God needs no one: "*Anyone who turns away should remember that God is truly self-sufficient, worthy of all praise.*" (Verse 6)

In this round, the believers have been taken back to the early period of their long history, remembering their first origins on earth. They have learnt from the experience of those earlier generations and reviewed the conclusion to which such experience led. The way to follow is

not difficult, especially since they are not the first to tread it. The Qur'ān repeats this conclusion so as to make the procession of faith uninterrupted. No one who follows the same way should feel lonely, even if he finds himself the only one in his generation following that way! He will not find it difficult to discharge his duty because previous travellers discharged it before him.

Whom to Boycott

God knows how eager the early Muslims were to see the hostility and conflict with their own people come to an end. Therefore, the *sūrah* raises before them the hope that those enemies might yet join the Muslims and accept the Islamic faith. In this way, hostility between the two camps would be replaced by firmly-based affection. Again, the *sūrah* lightens their burden, stating the main rule on which international relations between the Muslim community and other powers are based. Thus, boycott and enmity are applied only in cases of aggression and hostility by unbelievers. When there is no aggression against Muslims and hostilities are absent, then Muslims should treat others kindly, as they deserve, always maintaining fairness and justice:

> *It may well be that God will bring about affection between you and those who are now your enemies. God is all powerful; God is much forgiving, ever merciful. God does not forbid you to deal kindly and with full equity with those who do not fight you on account of your faith, nor drive you out of your homes. God loves those who behave equitably. God only forbids you to turn in friendship towards those who fight against you because of your faith, and drive you from your homes, and help others to drive you out. Those of you who turn towards them in friendship are indeed wrongdoers.* (Verses 7–9)

Islam is a religion of peace, a faith based on love. It wants only for others to benefit from and implement its sound way of life. It wants all people to come together, under God's banner, as a fraternity based on love. Nothing prevents this other than aggression by Islam's enemies. Should those enemies wish to live in peace with Islam and Muslims,

Islam will not be the one to start enmity. Even if enmity and hostility exists, Islam preserves the seeds of friendship by extending justice and good treatment to its enemies, hoping that they will one day be convinced that their own advantage lies in adopting its noble beliefs. Islam never despairs of this possibility.

The first verse of this section refers to this hope that is never extinguished by despair. It seeks to lighten the burden of some of the Muhājirīn who were troubled by conflict with their own people: "*It may well be that God will bring about affection between you and those who are now your enemies.*" (Verse 7) As this prospect of hope is raised by God, it was certain to become a reality. When the Muslims heard it, they were certain that it would be fulfilled. Indeed, it was not long after, when Makkah fell to Islam, that the people of the Quraysh became Muslims, and all joined together under the same banner. All enmity between them disappeared and all were united as brethren.

"*God is all powerful.*" (Verse 7) He accomplishes what He wills, and no one can raise an objection, let alone try to stop Him. "*God is much forgiving, ever merciful.*" (Verse 7) He will forgive past sins and hostility.

Until God's promise is fulfilled, expressed here in the form of a hope, God gives them permission to be friendly with those who did not fight them or drive them out of their homes on account of their faith. No blame would attach to them if they maintained friendly relations with such people, treating them fairly, giving them all their due. On the other hand, there is a strict prohibition against friendship with those who fought them, drove them out of their land, or even helped in driving them out. Those who violate this prohibition are judged as wrongdoers. Wrongdoing is equated with unbelief, as God says in the Qur'ān: "*To associate partners with Him is indeed a great wrong.*" (31: 13) This is, then, a very serious warning that strikes awe in a believer's heart.

This rule about how to treat non-Muslims is most fair and fits with the nature of Islam and its outlook on human life and on the universe as a whole. It represents the basis of its international law, which considers the state of peace to be the permanent state with all peoples and groupings. This state of peace is revoked only when military aggression against Islam and its people takes place, for it is imperative that such aggression be

repelled; or when treason is feared after a treaty with others has been signed, for this represents a threat of aggression; or when freedom of belief and advocating Islam is forcibly suppressed, which again represents aggression. In all other cases, Islam extends the hand of peace, affection and justice to all people.

This rule fits perfectly with the overall Islamic concept, which makes the only bone of contention between them and their opponents that of faith. The only value a Muslim will not compromise, even if this forces him to fight, is faith. Nothing puts Muslims in conflict and hostility with other communities except the question of the freedom to present their faith to people, the freedom of belief, the freedom to implement the divine code in human life.

This directive fits with the drift of the *sūrah* which aims to give prominence to faith, making it the only banner Muslims raise. Whoever stands under it belongs to them, and whoever fights them on account of it is their enemy. Anyone who maintains peace with them, leaving them to their faith, preventing no one from listening to it and adopting it, and putting no pressure on those who believe in it is a person at peace. Islam allows kindly treatment to be extended to such people.

A Muslim lives for his faith, making it his sole purpose within himself and with all people. He does not enter into conflict for gain, nor does he fight for ties of race, land, tribe or family. His only struggle is to ensure that God's word reigns supreme, and that His faith is the code to be followed.

Sometime later *Sūrah* 9, Repentance, was revealed, starting with the verse that gave notice to communities that held peace treaties with the Muslim state. It gave a four-month notice of termination of any treaty that did not specify a term of expiry. Treaties that ran for a specified notice remained valid until the end of their terms. This measure was taken after practical experience showed that the idolaters in Arabia only observed their treaties with the Muslim community until they had a chance of victory should they violate such treaties. This brought into operation the other rule concerning such treaties: "*If you fear treachery from any folk, cast [your treaty with them] back to them in a fair manner. God does not love the treacherous.*" (8: 58) To give notice of termination in a fair way was necessary to secure the Islamic base, which at the time

included the whole of the Arabian Peninsula, against its enemies living alongside them. These were the idolaters and people of earlier religions who were repeatedly in breach of their treaties, trying to take the Muslim community unawares. This was essentially a permanent situation of aggression. Another reason for this measure was the fact that the two superpowers at the time, the Byzantine and Persian Empires, began to feel that Islam could become a source of danger to them and this they wanted to pre-empt. Therefore, they started to encourage Arab tribes living close to them to take a hostile attitude towards the Muslim state. All this necessitated that the Islamic base be made solid and secure from any internal enemy before any clash with outside powers could take place.

Women Migrants

The *sūrah* issues a ruling concerning women believers who might join the Muslim community:

> *Believers! When believing women come to you as migrants, test them. God knows best their faith. If you ascertain that they are believers, do not send them back to the unbelievers. They are no longer lawful [as wives] for the unbelievers, and these are no longer lawful to them. None the less, hand back to the unbelievers the dowries they have paid them. It is no offence for you to marry them after giving them their dowries. Do not hold on to marriage ties with unbelieving women. Ask for repayment of the dowries you have paid, just as they have the right to ask for repayment of their dowries. Such is God's judgement. He judges between you in equity. God is all-knowing, wise. Should any of your wives go over to the unbelievers and you subsequently acquire gains from them, then pay those whose wives have gone away the equivalent of whatever dowry they had paid. Fear God, in whom you believe.* (Verses 10–11)

The Prophet concluded the al-Ḥudaybiyah Treaty with the Quraysh in Makkah and this specified a condition whereby the Prophet and the Muslim community would return to them anyone who went over to the

Muslims, even though that person might be a Muslim. Reports mention that when the Prophet was about to leave al-Ḥudaybiyah, a few women came over to him seeking to join the Muslim community in Madīnah. The Quraysh asked for their extradition in accordance with the terms of the treaty. It appears that those terms were not conclusive in the case of women. These two verses were revealed to block returning women believers to the unbelievers, for fear that they would be persecuted on account of their faith.[1]

This was a situation requiring rules of international law. These rules outlined here regulate such cases on the basis of absolute fairness, without allowing the behaviour of the other party, unfair as it may be, to influence the Islamic stand. Furthermore, Islam's stance is that it ensures justice in all internal and external dealings.

The first step required by these rules was to test migrating women in order to determine their reasons for migration. In other words, they must not be trying to escape from a marriage that had gone wrong, or be pursuing some other material benefit, or hoping to marry men they were in love with in the Muslim community. Ibn 'Abbās reports that the Prophet tested any such woman, asking her: "By God, have you fled to us because you hate your husband? By God, have you come to us merely to migrate to a new land? By God, are you coming to us in pursuit of some material gain? By God, have you come to us only because you love God and His Messenger?"

'Ikrimah explains that the test was a form of questioning so as to establish whether the woman was migrating only because she loved God and His Messenger or for some other purpose. The test was also to establish whether or not she was in love with a man from the Muslim community, and whether or not she was fleeing from her husband.

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1. It should be mentioned here that the Prophet and the Muslims abided by this treaty, right from the first moment after its signing. Hardly had the treaty been so signed when Suhayl ibn 'Amr, the Quraysh negotiator, saw his son coming to the Muslim camp seeking refuge. He was a Muslim but his father had imprisoned him and tried to force him to revert to idolatry. Suhayl demanded that his son be handed back to him, and the Prophet granted his request. He explained that Muslims are always true to their pledges. The events leading to the signing of this peace treaty are dealt with in detail in the commentary on *Sūrah* 48 in this volume. – Editor's note.

Such, then, was the test. It relied on statements made under oath. Whether such a woman had any different motive, God only knew. People simply cannot establish this with any measure of certainty: "*God knows best their faith.*" (Verse 10) When they have made their statements under oath, confirming that they are believers, then the Muslim community cannot "*send them back to the unbelievers. They are no longer lawful [as wives] for the unbelievers, and these are no longer lawful to them.*" (Verse 10) When the most important bond of faith has been severed, nothing can repair the relationship. Marriage is a union of permanent settlement and it cannot be properly established when the primary bond of faith is absent. Faith is the basic and vital emotion that keeps a heart alive; it cannot be replaced by any other. A believer's heart cannot warm to another that is devoid of faith. There can be no true feeling of mutual inclination or security between two hearts when only one of them has faith. Marriage survives on mutual affection, compassion, inclination and security.

After the Prophet's migration to Madīnah this issue had been left open, with no rule stated about it in the Qur'ān. Therefore, no couple were separated even if only one accepted Islam while the other did not. This was due to the fact that the Muslim society had not yet by then established firm roots. When al-Ḥudaybiyah Treaty was concluded, it was time that such a separation be made. Muslims, men and women, should understand that the bond that overrides all other bonds is faith, and they should put this rule into practice.

The provision for separating such couples was accompanied by a provision for compensation. Thus, an unbeliever whose wife left him because she was Muslim was entitled to receive back whatever he had paid to her in dowry at the time of their marriage. The same applied in reverse, should the man be a believer and his wife not.

When this had been done, the Muslims could marry such migrant women, provided that they paid them dowries. Scholars differ as to whether such women should observe a waiting period; as also over the length of the waiting period. Some scholars say that it is the same as that observed by a divorced woman, i.e. until she has gone through three menstrual periods, while others maintain that it lasts only until she has completed one period, to make sure that she is not pregnant. It

is agreed that if any such woman is pregnant, her waiting period lasts until she has given birth.

"*None the less, hand back to the unbelievers the dowries they have paid them. It is no offence for you to marry them after giving them their dowries. Do not hold on to marriage ties with unbelieving women. Ask for repayment of the dowries you have paid, just as they have the right to ask for repayment of their dowries.*" (Verse 10) All these rules are then tied to the strongest guarantee a believer has, which is that of watching God and fearing Him: "*Such is God's judgement. He judges between you in equity. God is all-knowing, wise.*" (Verse 10) Indeed, this is the only inviolable guarantee. God's judgement is that of the One who knows what is in people's hearts, the Almighty who has power over all creatures. It is enough that a Muslim should realize the source of this judgement in order to implement it fully, because he knows that he will ultimately return to God.

Should a believer lose what he had paid in dowry, because his unbeliever wife or her family refuses to refund her Muslim husband, as happened in some cases, the Muslim ruler would compensate him for this, taking this from any money due to the unbelievers whose Muslim wives had migrated to join the Muslim community, or from any war gains made by the Muslim community: "*Should any of your wives go over to the unbelievers and you subsequently acquire gains from them, then pay those whose wives have gone away the equivalent of whatever dowry they had paid.*" (Verse 11) Again this ruling is tied to the same guarantee that ensures the implementation of every Islamic rule: "*Fear God, in whom you believe.*" (Verse 11) This is a profound and touching instruction for believers.

We see how these rulings concerning the separation of married couples provide an example of the practical implementation of the Islamic concept of life values and ties. They reflect the unity of the Muslim community and its being distinct from any other. It is a community where all life is based on faith, where all distinctions of race, colour, language, family and land are insignificant. There is only one sign that distinguishes between people – the sign of the party to which they belong. There are only two parties: the party of God and the party of Satan.

Women's Pledge of Allegiance

The Prophet is then instructed on how women should pledge their allegiance, and what the terms of their pledge should be:

> *Prophet! When believing women come and pledge to you that they will not associate any partner with God, nor steal, nor commit adultery, nor kill their children, nor lie about who fathered their children, nor disobey you in anything reasonable, then accept their pledge of allegiance and pray to God to forgive them. God is most forgiving, ever merciful.* (Verse 12)

These terms outline the major elements of faith, and provide the framework of the new social system established by Islam. They comprise associating no partners with God in any way whatsoever. They confirm that offences with prescribed penalties, such as theft and adultery, should never be committed. Women should also pledge never to kill their children. This is a reference to the pre-Islamic practice of burying girls alive, and includes killing embryos for any reason. Women are placed in trust of their pregnancies. Another term of the pledge women give is that they should never "*lie about who fathered their children*."[2] Ibn 'Abbās says: "This means that they must not attribute to their husbands any child that does not belong to them. The same view is stated by Muqātil. Perhaps this term, coming as it does after that of refraining from adultery altogether, was to address some practices of pre-Islamic days, when a woman might sleep with several men and when she gave birth to a child, she would choose its father from among them on the basis of looks, or perhaps on some other basis when she knew who its true father was. However, the text includes this and any other case of falsehood in this regard. Perhaps Ibn 'Abbās and Muqātil referred to this particular situation because of a case at the time.

The last term in women's pledge of allegiance is that they must not "*disobey you in anything reasonable.*" This means a commitment to obey

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2. A more literal translation of this term of the pledge is "nor perpetrate any falsehood of their invention with regard to what is between their hands and legs." The chosen translation is based on the views of most leading scholars, as indicated in the commentary above. – Editor's note.

the Prophet in everything he says, because he never ordered anything other than what is reasonable and good. However, this term is also one of the main elements of the Islamic constitution. It makes clear that obedience of the Muslim ruler remains valid only within what is reasonable, i.e. what is in line with Islam and its laws. It does not give blanket cover, requiring obedience in every situation whatsoever. This rule ensures that the force of any legislation is derived from its being based on God's law, not the will of the ruler or the nation should they differ with God's law. Both ruler and nation are subject to God's law and derive their authority from it.

When women give such a comprehensive pledge of allegiance, their pledges are accepted. The Prophet is asked to pray to God to forgive them what they might have done in the past: "*Then accept their pledge of allegiance and pray to God to forgive them. God is most forgiving, ever merciful.*" (Verse 12) It is God who forgives and pardons.

The *sūrah* concludes with a general directive:

> *Believers! Do not take as friends any people with whom God is angry. They despair of the life to come just as the unbelievers despair of those buried in their graves.* (Verse 13)

This is addressed to believers in their capacity of faith, a faith that distinguishes them from all other communities. Some reports suggest that the description of '*people with whom God is angry*' refers to the Jews, since they have been branded as such elsewhere in the Qur'ān. However, we have here a general text that applies to the Jews, the polytheists and all other enemies of God. All these groups have incurred God's anger. All of them despair of the life to come. They never take it seriously, and never give it a thought. Their despair of it is the same as that of unbelievers who think that those who died will never return and be resurrected.

This final address sums up the theme of the *sūrah*, giving it a conclusion akin to its opening. Its message is thus very clearly stated.

SŪRAH 61

Al-Ṣaff

(The Ranks)

Prologue

This *sūrah* seeks to establish two major themes which permeate its entire text. It also includes a number of secondary references which relate to those major themes.

The first aim of the *sūrah* is to establish in the conscience of every Muslim the fact that his religion is the final version of the divine system God has laid down for mankind. There were earlier versions, each suited for a particular period of human history. There were also experiences in the lives of earlier messengers and past communities that afforded much to reflect upon. All these have paved the way for this final version of the one divine faith. It incorporates God's final message for mankind, which He has willed to prevail over all other religions.

Hence, the *sūrah* mentions Moses' message, making it clear that his people caused him much grief and deviated from his message. They had gone astray and were no longer to be trustees of the divine faith: "*Now when Moses spoke to his people, he said: 'My people! Why do you cause me grief, when you know that I am a messenger God has sent to you?' So, when they swerved from the right way, God let their hearts swerve from the truth. God does not bestow His guidance upon evildoers.*" (Verse 5)

The *sūrah* then mentions Jesus' message to establish that Jesus was sent to carry on Moses' earlier message, confirming what was revealed before him of the Torah. He was also given the task of paving the way for the final message, giving news of the Messenger who was to carry it, and serving as a link between the first and the last divine religions. *"And also Jesus, the son of Mary, said: Children of Israel! I am God's messenger to you, [sent] to confirm the Torah revealed before me, and to give news of a messenger that will come after me, whose name shall be Aḥmad."* (Verse 6) Hence, his task was to carry the trust of the divine faith after Moses and then to give it to the Messenger whose coming he announced.

It was always confirmed, according to God's knowledge and by His will, that these steps would eventually lead to a final and permanent version to establish God's faith in human life, and this by the final Messenger: *"It is He who has sent His Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth, so that He may cause it to prevail over all other religions, however hateful this may be to the idolaters."* (Verse 9)

This first clear purpose of the *sūrah* gives rise to its second purpose. When a Muslim is fully aware of this fact, knows the history of the divine faith and is aware of his share of it, he realizes the duties that this trust involves. Hence, he has a clear and sincere motive for striving to ensure that this faith prevails over all other religions, just as God wants it to do. There is no longer any vacillation in practically carrying out what one verbally has proposed to do. It is inappropriate for a believer to declare his intention to strive for God's cause but then to refrain from doing so. According to some reports, it appears that there were some cases of this sort. Hence, the *sūrah* starts with a proclamation that the entire universe and all that is in it unceasingly glorify God. *"Believers! Why do you say what you do not do? Most loathsome is it in the sight of God that you say what you do not do! God loves indeed those who fight in His cause in solid ranks, as though they were a firm and compact building."* (Verses 2–4)

In the middle of the *sūrah*, the believers are called upon to take part in the most profitable transaction that they could have in this life and in the life to come: *"Believers! Shall I point out to you a bargain that will save you from grievous suffering? You are to believe in God and His Messenger,*

and to strive hard in God's cause with your possessions and your lives. This is for your own good, if you but knew it. He will forgive you your sins, and [in the life to come] will admit you into gardens through which running waters flow, and into goodly mansions in the gardens of Eden. That is the supreme triumph! And [He will grant you] yet another thing that you dearly love: help from God and a victory soon to come. Give you the good news to the believers." (Verses 10–13)

The *sūrah* ends with an appeal to the believers to be the helpers in furthering God's cause, just like Jesus' disciples who supported him when the Israelites continued to deny his message and were hostile towards him: "*Believers! Be helpers [in the cause] of God; just as Jesus, the son of Mary, said to the disciples: "Who will be my helpers in God's cause?" The disciples said: "We shall be [your] helpers in God's cause." And so some of the Children of Israel came to believe whereas others denied the truth. But We have given those who believed strength over their enemy and they were the ones to prevail.*" (Verse 14)

These two purposes are very clear throughout the *sūrah*, taking up nearly all of its text. There only remains a denunciation of those who reject the final message, which is clearly linked to the two main themes. We see this clearly stated after Jesus gave the news of the impending appearance of the final Messenger, the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him): "*But when he came to them with all evidence of the truth, they said: 'This is plain sorcery.' Who could be more wicked than one who invents a falsehood about God, when he is only being called upon to submit to Him? God does not bestow His guidance upon the wrongdoers. They aim to extinguish God's light with their mouths, but God will spread His light in all its fullness, however hateful this may be to the unbelievers.*"(Verses 6–8)

Thus, every Muslim is clear in his mind that his faith is the final version of the religion God wants to be established on earth. He realizes that the trust of this divine faith is given to him, and he knows that he is required to strive for God's cause as God wants. His line is clear, leaving no room for ambiguity, hesitation or faltering. The goal is well defined and the way to achieve it is made clear.

With this goal-defining directive we also have clear pointers to the nature of the moral code a Muslim must follow. A Muslim must

demonstrate consistency between his conscience and his action. He cannot say one thing and then do another. His appearance must not fundamentally differ from what he conceals within himself. He must be consistent in all situations, dedicated in his service to God's cause, clear in both his intention and action, moving with steady steps, collaborating with his brothers so that the Muslim community is seen to be solid and firm like a building with strong foundations.

Al-Ṣaff (The Ranks)

سُورَةُ الصَّفِّ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

All that is in the heavens and in the earth extols God's limitless glory: for He alone is the almighty, truly wise. (1)

سَبَّحَ لِلَّهِ مَا فِى ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَمَا فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ ۖ وَهُوَ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلْحَكِيمُ ﴿١﴾

Believers! Why do you say what you do not do? (2)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ لِمَ تَقُولُونَ مَا لَا تَفْعَلُونَ ﴿٢﴾

Most loathsome is it in the sight of God that you say what you do not do! (3)

كَبُرَ مَقْتًا عِندَ ٱللَّهِ أَن تَقُولُوا۟ مَا لَا تَفْعَلُونَ ﴿٣﴾

God loves indeed those who fight in His cause in solid ranks, as though they were a firm and compact building. (4)

إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يُحِبُّ ٱلَّذِينَ يُقَٰتِلُونَ فِى سَبِيلِهِۦ صَفًّا كَأَنَّهُم بُنْيَٰنٌ مَّرْصُوصٌ ﴿٤﴾

Now when Moses spoke to his people, he said: "My people! Why do you cause me grief, when you know that I am a messenger God has sent to you?" So, when they swerved from the right way, God let their hearts swerve from the truth. God does not bestow His guidance upon evildoers. (5)

وَإِذْ قَالَ مُوسَىٰ لِقَوْمِهِۦ يَٰقَوْمِ لِمَ تُؤْذُونَنِى وَقَد تَّعْلَمُونَ أَنِّى رَسُولُ ٱللَّهِ إِلَيْكُمْ ۖ فَلَمَّا زَاغُوٓا۟ أَزَاغَ ٱللَّهُ قُلُوبَهُمْ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ لَا يَهْدِى ٱلْقَوْمَ ٱلْفَٰسِقِينَ ﴿٥﴾

And also Jesus, the son of Mary, said: "Children of Israel! I am God's messenger to you, [sent] to confirm the Torah revealed before me, and to give news of a messenger that will come after me, whose name shall be Aḥmad." But when he came to them with all evidence of the truth, they said: "This is plain sorcery." (6)

وَإِذْ قَالَ عِيسَى ٱبْنُ مَرْيَمَ يَٰبَنِىٓ إِسْرَٰٓءِيلَ إِنِّى رَسُولُ ٱللَّهِ إِلَيْكُم مُّصَدِّقًا لِّمَا بَيْنَ يَدَىَّ مِنَ ٱلتَّوْرَىٰةِ وَمُبَشِّرًۢا بِرَسُولٍ يَأْتِى مِنۢ بَعْدِى ٱسْمُهُۥٓ أَحْمَدُ فَلَمَّا جَآءَهُم بِٱلْبَيِّنَٰتِ قَالُوا۟ هَٰذَا سِحْرٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٦﴾

Who could be more wicked than one who invents a falsehood about God, when he is only being called upon to submit to Him? God does not bestow His guidance upon the wrongdoers. (7)

وَمَنْ أَظْلَمُ مِمَّنِ ٱفْتَرَىٰ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ ٱلْكَذِبَ وَهُوَ يُدْعَىٰٓ إِلَى ٱلْإِسْلَٰمِ وَٱللَّهُ لَا يَهْدِى ٱلْقَوْمَ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ﴿٧﴾

They aim to extinguish God's light with their mouths, but God will spread His light in all its fullness, however hateful this may be to the unbelievers. (8)

يُرِيدُونَ لِيُطْفِـُٔوا۟ نُورَ ٱللَّهِ بِأَفْوَٰهِهِمْ وَٱللَّهُ مُتِمُّ نُورِهِۦ وَلَوْ كَرِهَ ٱلْكَٰفِرُونَ ﴿٨﴾

It is He who has sent His Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth, so that He may cause it to prevail over all other religions, however hateful this may be to the idolaters. (9)

هُوَ ٱلَّذِىٓ أَرْسَلَ رَسُولَهُۥ بِٱلْهُدَىٰ وَدِينِ ٱلْحَقِّ لِيُظْهِرَهُۥ عَلَى ٱلدِّينِ كُلِّهِۦ وَلَوْ كَرِهَ ٱلْمُشْرِكُونَ ﴿٩﴾

Believers! Shall I point out to you a bargain that will save you from grievous suffering? (10)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ هَلْ أَدُلُّكُمْ عَلَىٰ تِجَٰرَةٍ تُنجِيكُم مِّنْ عَذَابٍ أَلِيمٍ ﴿١٠﴾

You are to believe in God and His Messenger, and to strive hard in God's cause with your possessions and your lives. This is for your own good, if you but knew it. (11)

تُؤْمِنُونَ بِاللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ وَتُجَاهِدُونَ فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ بِأَمْوَالِكُمْ وَأَنفُسِكُمْ ذَلِكُمْ خَيْرٌ لَّكُمْ إِن كُنتُمْ تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿١١﴾

He will forgive you your sins, and [in the life to come] will admit you into gardens through which running waters flow, and into goodly mansions in the gardens of Eden. That is the supreme triumph! (12)

يَغْفِرْ لَكُمْ ذُنُوبَكُمْ وَيُدْخِلْكُمْ جَنَّاتٍ تَجْرِي مِن تَحْتِهَا الْأَنْهَارُ وَمَسَاكِنَ طَيِّبَةً فِي جَنَّاتِ عَدْنٍ ذَلِكَ الْفَوْزُ الْعَظِيمُ ﴿١٢﴾

And [He will grant you] yet another thing that you dearly love: help from God and a victory soon to come. Give you the good news to the believers. (13)

وَأُخْرَى تُحِبُّونَهَا نَصْرٌ مِّنَ اللَّهِ وَفَتْحٌ قَرِيبٌ وَبَشِّرِ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿١٣﴾

Believers! Be helpers [in the cause] of God; just as Jesus, the son of Mary, said to the disciples: "Who will be my helpers in God's cause?" The disciples said: "We shall be [your] helpers in God's cause." And so some of the Children of Israel came to believe whereas others denied the truth. But We have given those who believed strength over their enemy and they were the ones to prevail. (14)

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا كُونُوا أَنصَارَ اللَّهِ كَمَا قَالَ عِيسَى ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ لِلْحَوَارِيِّينَ مَنْ أَنصَارِي إِلَى اللَّهِ قَالَ الْحَوَارِيُّونَ نَحْنُ أَنصَارُ اللَّهِ فَآمَنَت طَّائِفَةٌ مِّن بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ وَكَفَرَت طَّائِفَةٌ فَأَيَّدْنَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا عَلَى عَدُوِّهِمْ فَأَصْبَحُوا ظَاهِرِينَ ﴿١٤﴾

Words and Actions

> *All that is in the heavens and in the earth extols God's limitless glory: for He alone is the almighty, truly wise.* (Verse 1)

The whole universe participates in this glorification of God Almighty whose might is combined with His infinite wisdom. This glorification begins this *sūrah*, which declares to Muslims that their religion is the last and final version of the divine faith. They are placed in a position of trustees of this faith based on God's oneness, denouncing all deviation perpetrated by unbelievers and idolaters. Muslims are also called upon to strive in support of this faith, which God has willed to prevail over all other religions, hateful as this may be to unbelievers. This opening, thus, implies that the trust given to Muslims belongs to the entire universe; the faith they strive for is the faith of all creatures in the heavens and the earth. Hence, this religion's prevalence is a universal phenomenon, one that is in line with the whole universe as it turns to God Almighty.

A group of believers are strongly reproached for something they did that was particularly hateful to God. This was inappropriate behaviour for believers:

> *Believers! Why do you say what you do not do? Most loathsome is it in the sight of God that you say what you do not do! God loves indeed those who fight in His cause in solid ranks, as though they were a firm and compact building.* (Verses 2–4)

Ibn 'Abbās reports that prior to making *Jihād* obligatory, some believers used to say: "We wish that God would tell us what action is most loved by Him, so that we could do it." God instructed His Messenger to say that what God loves most is a belief in Him that allows no room for doubt, and striving against deviant people who reject the faith. However, when *Jihād* was made obligatory, a number of believers found it difficult, and they disliked itdistasteful. Hence the revelation of the verses saying: "*Believers! Why do you say what you do not do? Most loathsome is it in the sight of God that you say what you do not do!*" (Verse 2–3) Al-Ṭabarī also confirmed this in his commentary on the *sūrah*.

On the other hand, Ibn Kathīr says in his commentary that the majority of scholars agree that these verses were revealed when some Muslims turned away from *Jihād* when it was declared a duty. He adds that this is the same as other verses in the Qur'ān: "*Are you not aware of those who have been told, 'Hold back your hands [from fighting], and attend regularly to prayer, and pay your* zakāt *[i.e. the purifying dues]'? When, at length, the order for fighting was issued to them, some of them stood in awe of men as one should stand in awe of God – or in even greater awe – and said, 'Our Lord! Why have you ordered us to fight? If only You had granted us a delay for a little while!' Say, 'Brief is the enjoyment of this world, whereas the life to come is the best for all who are God-fearing. None of you shall be wronged by as much as a hair's breadth. Wherever you may be death will overtake you, even though you be in towers built up strong and high.*'" (4: 77–78)

Qatādah and al-Ḍaḥḥāq say that this verse reproaches those who used to boast about their exploits, claiming that they had fought and killed the enemy, when they had not done so.

Looking at these verses, their context and the mention of fighting, we feel that the occasion inviting their revelation was the one mentioned by the majority of scholars and by Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī. However, Qur'ānic texts always take dimensions that go beyond the individual events which they address. They also comment on many other events in addition to the immediate occasion. Therefore, we look at these verses according to their general import, without forgetting the immediate events for which they were revealed.

The *sūrah* starts then with a reproach for behaviour in one or more actual events: "*Believers! Why do you say what you do not do?*" (Verse 2) It then denounces this action and its lack of morality in a doubly powerful way: "*Most loathsome is it in the sight of God that you say what you do not do!*" (Verse 3) What is viewed by God as most loathsome must certainly be very hateful and repugnant. This statement is sufficient then to make believers view this in the vilest of terms, particularly as they are addressed by God as people who have accepted His religion and who believe in Him.

The next verse refers to that particular matter when they did something different to what they used to profess, namely *Jihād*. It defines what God

likes in this question and what earns His pleasure: "*God loves indeed those who fight in His cause in solid ranks, as though they were a firm and compact building.*" (Verse 4) This is not mere fighting, but fighting for God's cause, in collaboration with the Muslim community, within its ranks, and with resolve and steadfastness, so that believers remain "*in solid ranks, as though they were a firm and compact building.*"

Moral Values in Practice

We have said on several occasions that as it was being revealed, the Qur'ān was carrying on with a process of nation building. Its aim was to build a community that carried the trust of the divine message, implemented its approach and established its system in human life. It was necessary for this purpose that the Qur'ān should undertake the reform of its individuals, establish its bonds as a community, and build it as a living nation in practice. All of this was to be accomplished at the same time. A Muslim is not a Muslim unless he functions within a community. It is inconceivable for Islam to be put into practice unless it functions in a community with well-defined bonds, a system and goal. Its ultimate goal applies to the community as a whole, but it also applies at the same time to each individual. This goal consists of establishing the divine system in people's consciences and practices on earth. To achieve the latter, Islam must live in an actual community that implements it fully.

Islam places much emphasis on the individual's conscience and responsibility, but it is certainly not a religion of individuals who dedicate themselves to worship in their respective little corners. This does not establish Islam within the individual's own conscience, let alone in his whole life. Islam was not revealed in such isolation. Rather, it was revealed to establish its criteria and standards in human life. It aims to put its mark on every individual and collective activity in every direction. Mankind do not live as individuals, but as groups, communities and nations. And Islam wants to provide people with its controls as they conduct their lives. Hence, it is so structured as to cater for people as they live. Its morality, manners, rules and systems are all formulated on this basis. When Islam directs its attention to the conscience of the

individual, it moulds this conscience on the basis that the individual lives in a community. Both the individual and the community turn to God and seek His pleasure. Therefore, a Muslim works within his community to fulfil the religious trust on earth and to establish the Islamic system in life.

Right from the very first day of the Islamic message, a Muslim community was established under the leadership of the Prophet (peace be upon him). Its individuals had their commitments towards their community, which also had its special entity distinguishing it from all other communities. It had its values that related to the human conscience but which looked at the same time to the life and welfare of the community. All this took place before the Islamic state was established in Madīnah. Indeed, the formation of this community was the means by which the Islamic state was later established.

When we look at these three verses we find that the morality of the individual is intertwined with the needs of the community, under the authority of religious faith. By its very nature, this faith can function fully in human life only in the form of a system that is properly served and protected.

The first two of the three verses under discussion refer to God's punishment and a strong censure if believers say something that is belied by their deeds. Thus, these two verses delineate the hugely important qualities of truthfulness and consistency in a Muslim's personality. A Muslim must reflect the same image in his inner self and in his appearance. His actions must be consistent with his words. This applies in all situations and goes far beyond the call to *Jihād* to which the third verse refers.

The Qur'ān places great emphasis on this Islamic characteristic, which is also repeatedly emphasized in the *sunnah*. Denouncing the Jews, God says: "*How can you bid others to piety and forget yourselves even while you are reciting the Book? Do you not understand?*" (2: 44) "*They say: 'We do obey you,' but when they leave you, some of them devise, in secret, something different from what you advocate.*" (4: 81) "*There is a kind of man who pleases you greatly in the present life by what he says, and he cites God as witness to what is in his heart, whereas he is the most antagonistic of adversaries. Yet, no sooner does he turn away than he strives to spread corruption in*

the world, destroying crops and progeny. God does not love corruption." (2: 204–205) The Prophet says: "The three distinctive marks of a hypocrite are: he lies when he speaks, and breaks his promises, and he is untrue to his trust." [Related by al-Bukhārī, Muslim, al-Tirmidhī and al-Nasā'ī.] There are numerous *aḥādīth* that emphasize the same concept. Perhaps the *ḥadīth* we will quote now includes one of the most subtle and refined directives by the Prophet to reiterate this moral aspect of Islam. Imām Aḥmad and Abū Dāwūd relate this report by 'Abdullāh ibn 'Āmir ibn Rabī'ah: "God's Messenger came to us when I was a young boy. I wanted to go out to play, but my mother said to me, ''Abdullāh, come and I will give you something.' The Prophet said to her, 'What do you want to give him?' She replied, 'Dates.' He said, 'If you would not give him anything, it would have been recorded against you as a lie'."

Perhaps Imām Aḥmad was guided by this *ḥadīth* when he travelled a long distance to meet someone whom he wanted to ask about another *ḥadīth*. However, when he arrived at the man's place, he saw him raising his robe in a way that suggested to his mule that it contained food, but there was nothing in the robe. Imām Aḥmad then felt that he should not report the *ḥadīth* reported by this man simply because he had lied to his mule.

A Muslim's conscience is reared to such a fine moral standard so as to build the character that can be entrusted with the establishment of the divine system in human life. This is what we see in this *sūrah*, which provides an important aspect of education for the Muslim community and its preparation to shoulder its great trust.

The *Jihād* Duty

Let us now consider the issue of *Jihād* which these verses addressed at the time of their revelation. We find here several points that need to be appreciated.

We see firstly that human beings may experience moments of weakness and this is when they need God's help to combat such shortcomings. They need repeated reminders and regular education. These verses refer to a group of Muslims who, according to some reports, belonged to the Muhājirīn, the early Muslims who migrated with the Prophet from

Makkah to Madīnah. Whilst in Makkah, they wished, in all enthusiasm, that God would allow them to fight, but they were told to hold back and attend to their worship duties instead. However, when later in Madīnah they were told to fight, at the time that was considered appropriate, they held a different attitude: "*Are you not aware of those who have been told, 'Hold back your hands [from fighting], and attend regularly to prayer, and pay your* zakāt *[i.e. the purifying dues]'? When, at length, the order for fighting was issued to them, some of them stood in awe of men as one should stand in awe of God – or in even greater awe – and said, 'Our Lord! Why have you ordered us to fight? If only You had granted us a delay for a little while!'*" (4: 77) Other reports suggest that they were a group of the Madīnan Muslims who asked about the action God loves most so that they could perform it. However, when they were ordered to fight for God's cause, they disliked this.

As we reflect on this, we realize that regular and repeated encouragement, directives and strengthening are all necessary for the human soul as it faces difficult tasks and responsibilities. Only with such repeated encouragement can the human soul maintain its path and overcome its weaknesses, setting its sight on higher objectives. Moreover, we realize that we must not ask to be given great goals when we face neither pressure nor difficulty. This because we may not be able to fulfil what we ask God to assign to us. Here, we see some early Muslims weakening to the extent that they say one thing and do another. Hence they faced this strong reproach from God.

Secondly, we need to reflect on the phraseology of the verse that speaks of God's love for those who fight for His cause in closed ranks, as though they were a firm and compact building. This represents profound encouragement to fight for God's cause. This statement was first made to deal with a case of reluctance and turning away from fighting, but this immediate cause does not change the fact that the encouragement is meant for all times and all peoples. Hence, there is a definite and constant purpose behind it.

Islam neither likes nor encourages fighting, but it makes it a duty on Muslims because life necessitates it, and because the purpose behind it is very important. Islam presents the final version of the divine system to humanity. Although this system meets all the needs of an upright

human nature, it requires that people exert themselves to rise to its standard and maintain it. On the other hand, there are numerous forces on earth that dislike this system and try to undermine it, because it deprives those forces of many privileges that are based on values Islam considers false and which it aims to eradicate from human life. These evil forces try to exploit people's weaknesses and their slackening after they have attained the high standard to which Islam elevates them. They also exploit people's ignorance and inherited values to oppose Islam and prevent the establishment of its system. Evil can muster great forces and falsehood is wont to boast of its power; Satan is indeed wicked and cunning. Hence, the advocates of faith who try to establish the Islamic system and protect it must be strong in order to overcome the agents of evil and Satan's supporters. They must be strong in their moral values, and tough in their fighting against evil. They must resort to combat when it is the only way to guarantee the freedom of action that promotes the Islamic system, and the freedom to believe in it and implement it in human life.

They fight for God's cause, not for their own glory or for any bonds of race, nationality, tribe or clan. The aim of their fight is that God's word reigns supreme, for the Prophet says: "Whoever fights to make God's word supreme fights for God's cause." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.]

God's word in this context is an expression of His will. What appears to us human beings, of God's will is that which conforms to the system that operates the universe, which in its entirety glorifies God and praises Him. The final version of God's divine faith, Islam, is the one that fits perfectly with the universal system. It makes the whole universe, including human beings, implement God's law, to the exclusion of all other laws.

It was inevitable that this faith should be opposed by individuals, classes and states. It was also inevitable that Islam should proceed along its way despite such opposition. Hence, it was necessary that *Jihād* should become obligatory on Muslims in support of this faith and for the purpose of making God's word supreme on earth. Hence, God loves those who fight for His cause with complete unity of hearts and unwavering dedication.

Finally, we need to reflect a little on the description of the state fighters should be in when they undertake *Jihād* for God's cause. They should be "*in solid ranks, as though they were a firm and compact building.*" (Verse 4) This is an individual's obligation discharged in a collective form, i.e. in a community with a clear system. This is because those who stand against Islam marshal their forces and try to raise great coalitions against it. Hence, the soldiers of Islam must face its enemies standing in solid and straight ranks. It is in the nature of the Islamic faith that when it triumphs it moves to establish a solid community. Hence, the image of an individual believer, worshipping God on his own, striving and living alone is far removed from the nature of this faith and its duties. This is true both at the time of *Jihād* and fighting, and at a time when victory has been secured and the Islamic community established.

This condition, which God loves for believers, portrays the nature of their faith and explains for them the landmarks on their way. It illustrates the nature of the close cooperation between them as portrayed by this creative Qur'ānic image: solid ranks like a firm and compact building. It is a building in which every brick is firmly placed in position, fulfilling its specific function. The whole edifice may collapse if one of its bricks moves out of place, whether forward or backward, so as not to firmly link with the one next to it in the higher or lower row or on either of its two sides. This is an expression that shows the reality, not merely gives a simile. It raises before us the nature of the Muslim community, the relations between individuals in this community, their feelings and united action within the overall system and towards a well-defined goal.

Denounced Attitude

The *sūrah* moves on to speak about the history of this divine system and the stages it went through with the messages revealed before Islam:

> *Now when Moses spoke to his people, he said: 'My people! Why do you cause me grief, when you know that I am a messenger God has sent to you?' So, when they swerved from the right way, God let their hearts swerve from the truth. God does not bestow His guidance upon evildoers. And also Jesus, the son of Mary, said: 'Children of Israel! I am God's messenger to you, [sent] to confirm the Torah revealed before*

me, and to give news of a Messenger that will come after me, whose name shall be Aḥmad.' (Verses 5–6)

Moses was the one who saved the Children of Israel from Pharaoh and his tyranny. He was God's messenger to them, their leader and teacher. Yet the grief that they caused him was of the extended type, taking many colours and forms. His struggle to put them on the right course was hard, tiring and trying. In the accounts the Qur'ān gives of Moses and his people we read about the different aspects of the grief they caused him and how hard he had to struggle to reform their belief system.

For example, they discouraged Moses' efforts to persuade Pharaoh to let them go free. So whilst he exposed himself to Pharaoh's wrath, they were safe having accepted their lot and humiliation. They even blamed Moses for worsening their plight: "*We have been oppressed before you came to us, and since you have come to us.*" (7: 129) The suggestion being that they did not see much good coming their way as a result of his message, or that they blamed him for this latest round of oppression.

No sooner did Moses, guided by God, deliver them from Pharaoh's humiliation – He caused Pharaoh and his people to drown before their very eyes – than they inclined themselves to a type of worship akin to Pharaoh's people: *We led the Children of Israel across the sea; and thereupon they came upon people who were dedicated to the worship of some idols of theirs. Said the Children of Israel: "Moses, set up a god for us like the gods they have."* (7: 138) Again, Moses had not been gone long for the appointment with his Lord to receive the tablets when the Sāmirī led them astray as he "*produced for them the effigy of a calf, which made a lowing sound. 'This,' they said, 'is your deity and the deity of Moses; but he has forgotten.'*" (20: 88)

They were also dissatisfied with their desert food, which was manna and quails. Thus they complained to their prophet: "*Moses! We can no longer put up with one kind of food. Pray to your Lord, then, to bring forth for us some of what the earth produces of green herbs, cucumber, garlic, lentils and onions.*" (2: 61) Mention should also be made here of the cow they were required to slaughter, yet they continued to demand explanations, seeking excuses and behaving impolitely to their prophet and to their

Lord. Time after time they said to Moses: "*Pray on our behalf to your Lord to make plain to us what kind of cow she should be.*" (2: 68) "*Pray on our behalf to your Lord to make clear to us of what colour she should be.*" (2: 69) "*Pray on our behalf to your Lord to make plain to us of what exact type she should be, for to us cows are much alike.*" (2: 70) When finally they ran out of excuses, "*They sacrificed her, although they had almost left it undone.*" (2: 71)

They requested that a day be assigned to them when they would not work. But when the Sabbath was ordained for them, they violated its rules. Later, when they were close to the Holy Land, which God told them they would enter, they stalled, not daring to go forward, while at the same time they spoke insolently to Moses: "*Mighty people dwell in that land, and we will surely not enter it unless they depart from it. If they do depart, then we will enter.*" (5: 22) He kept encouraging them, assuring them of the great success awaiting them, if they would only do what God had bidden them to do. Nonetheless, their insolence and disbelief reached new heights: "*They said, Moses, we will never go in so long as they are in it. Go forth, then, you and your Lord, and fight, both of you. We shall stay here.*" (5: 24)

They gave Moses much more grief, putting questions to him, making suggestions, and even starting a rebellion. Furthermore, as related in *aḥādīth*, they also falsely accused him. The *sūrah* mentions here how Moses remonstrated with them in a friendly way: "*My people! Why do you cause me grief, when you know that I am a messenger God has sent to you?*" (Verse 5) They knew for certain that he was God's messenger, but he did not put this fact across in a strong and assertive way. Rather, he simply gave them a remonstrating reminder. The result was that they swerved from the right way after being given every possible means of sticking to it. Hence, God let them go further astray and their hearts were no longer fit to receive guidance. "*God does not bestow His guidance upon evildoers.*" (Verse 5) Thus their trusteeship of the divine faith was over. They were no longer fit to carry God's message after they had gone so far astray.

Then Jesus came, saying: "*Children of Israel! I am God's messenger to you.*" (Verse 6) He did not say to them that he was God or the son of God or a manifestation of God. He was simply a messenger sent "*to*

confirm the Torah revealed before me, and to give news of a messenger that will come after me, whose name shall be Aḥmad." (Verse 6)

Thus we see how the divine faith moved from one stage to the next, with all the stages interrelated, moving in the same direction, stretching from heaven to the earth: a long chain moving from link to link. This is the proper image, one worthy of God's design and constitution. It is basically the same approach, taking slightly different forms, according to what suits the needs, experience, knowledge and potential of humanity at each particular stage, until it reaches full maturity. Only then does the last stage arrive and the final form of divine faith be given: perfect, complete, addressing a mature mind that has benefited from all past experience. It opens the way so that the human mind works to its full potential within the method set for man and his abilities.

That Jesus gave the news of the impending arrival of Aḥmad, (another name of the Prophet Muḥammad), is absolutely confirmed by this verse, whether the Gospels mention this or not. Note also that the circumstances surrounding the writing of these Gospels and the way they were written make them totally unreliable on this issue.

The Qur'ān was read to the Jews and Christians in the Arabian Peninsula, including the verse that speaks of the Prophet Muḥammad as "*the unlettered Prophet whom they shall find described in the Torah and the Gospel.*" (7: 157) Some of their genuine scholars who embraced Islam, such as 'Abdullāh ibn Sallām, acknowledged this fact, but they counselled each other to suppress.

Several reports also confirm that the Jews were awaiting the arrival of a new messenger; this was considered imminent. The same was stated by a number of Christian priests in Arabia who were unitarians, living in isolation. But the Jews wanted this messenger to be one of their own. When God so willed that he should belong to the other branch of Abraham's seed, the Jews disliked and opposed this. Needless to say, the Qur'ānic statement is the ultimate verdict on such matters. It is the final say.

Trying to Extinguish God's Light

It seems that the verses that follow are mostly concerned with the way the Jews and the Christians received the Prophet mentioned in their

scriptures. They are denounced for the reception they gave Muḥammad and for their designs to undermine the new and final message God willed to prevail over all other religions:

> *But when he came to them with all evidence of the truth, they said: 'This is plain sorcery.' Who could be more wicked than one who invents a falsehood about God, when he is only being called upon to submit to Him? God does not bestow His guidance upon the wrongdoers. They aim to extinguish God's light with their mouths, but God will spread His light in all its fullness, however hateful this may be to the unbelievers.* (Verses 6–8)

The Jews' attitude to this new faith was a combination of hostility, evil scheming and misrepresentation. They waged a determined fight against Islam, using all means and resources, and this has continued to the present day. They levelled charges against it: "*when he came to them with all evidence of the truth, they said: This is plain sorcery.*" (Verse 6) This echoes the allegations of idolaters who had no scriptures and had no advance news of the new faith. The Jews also sought to create discord within the Muslim community. In particular, they tried to create division between the Muhājirīn and the Anṣār in Madīnah, and between the two tribes of the Aws and the Khazraj. They conspired with the hypocrites at times and with the idolaters at others. They also joined with the idolaters' attack on Madīnah, as happened in the Battle of the Moat. Their designs against the new faith also included spreading false rumours, as happened in what is known as the story of falsehood in which the main culprit was 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy ibn Salūl. Later, they used the same tactics in the events masterminded by 'Abdullāh ibn Saba', which led to the assassination of 'Uthmān, the third Caliph. Thereafter, they tried further to undermine Islam with the fabrications and false stories they managed to infiltrate into *ḥadīth*, the reports of the history of the Prophet and the books of commentary on the Qur'ān. All this after they found themselves totally incapable of implanting any falsehood into the Qur'ān itself.

This war has continued unabated until the present day. Zionism and Christian imperialism have continued to scheme against Islam, launching or supporting aggression against Islam in every generation.

They launched the Crusades against the Muslim east, and they fought against the Muslims in Andalus in the west. They also fought against Islam in its central area launching one attack after another against the last Caliphate, i.e. the Ottoman Caliphate, which they called 'the sick man of Europe', until they managed to destroy it and divide its provinces. They needed to create false heroes in the land of Islam to carry out their schemes against it. When they needed to destroy the Caliphate as the last symbol of Islamic rule, they created in Turkey a national 'hero' and groomed his image. Thus, the Allied forces, which were in control of the Ottoman capital, retreated before his army in order to make him a great hero. In this way was he able to abolish the Caliphate regime and the Arabic language, and to separate Turkey from the rest of the Muslim world making of it a secular state. The Jews and Christians continue to create such false heroes whenever they feel the need to smash an Islamic movement in any Muslim country and replace Islamic ties with other bonds.

"*They aim to extinguish God's light with their mouths, but God will spread His light in all its fullness, however hateful this may be to the unbelievers.*" (Verse 8) This verse expresses a fact and paints a pathetic image of those enemies of Islam. It is true that they used to say about the Prophet and his message, '*This is plain sorcery*'. It is also true that they continued to scheme against Islam, trying to undermine it. It is a pathetic picture we see of them as they try to extinguish God's light with a blow from their mouths. How naïve and weak they are!

"*But God will spread His light in all its fullness, however hateful this may be to the unbelievers.*" (Verse 8) There is no doubt that God's promise will always come true. He brought His light to fullness during the lifetime of the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him), when the Muslim community came into being as a living and practical representation of the system He had chosen for mankind. It was a well-defined religion with clearly delineated features so that future generations could follow in its footsteps. It was a fact of history, not a theory explained in books. He also brought His light to fullness when he perfected the favour He bestowed on Muslims, choosing Islam as their religion and making it complete. Thus, they loved their religion and were keen to fight for its cause. Anyone of them would prefer to be thrown in a fire rather than

revert to disbelief. Thus the truth of the faith lived in people's hearts and in their world. This truth continues to spring up time after time, showing that it continues to live in spite of all the sustained aggression, repeated scheming and unabated persecution campaigns waged against Islam and its followers. The fact is that God's light cannot be extinguished by people's mouths, nor can it be stifled by fire and iron-fisted tactics to which some small people resort. It may appear to tyrants, stooges made up as heroes and to Zionists that they can achieve this goal and put out God's light, but all their efforts will come to nothing.

It is God's will that this religion should prevail. Hence, it is inevitable that it will:

> *It is He who has sent His Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth, so that He may cause it to prevail over all other religions, however hateful this may be to the idolaters.* (Verse 9)

That God testifies that this religion of Islam is '*guidance and the religion of truth*' is the final word. God's will has been fulfilled, and this religion has prevailed over all other religions. It has prevailed by its very nature as a religion. No other religion compares with it in its nature. Pagan and idolatrous religions cannot stand up to it for a moment. Divine religions, on the other hand, find it as their final and complete version. So, in essence, Islam is the perfect and complete version of these faiths, and it will preserve its pure form for the rest of time.

Earlier divine religions were distorted by omissions and additions. Thus, they became unfit to lead human life in any direction. Even if they had remained free of distortion, they are no more than earlier versions of the divine faith which did not cater for ever-increasing life requirements, because they were intended by God to serve for a limited time only.

This shows that God's promise has come true from the viewpoint of the nature of faith. As for real life, God's promise was fulfilled at one time when Islam gained power and established its own system of government. Within one century, most of the populated world came under its rule. Then it moved peacefully into Asia and Africa to win, through advocacy efforts, more than five times the numbers who embraced it during the early *Jihād* efforts. It continues to spread without having a single state implementing it fully, after Zionism and Christian imperialism

destroyed the last Caliphate in Turkey at the hands of the 'hero' they manufactured for this purpose. It continues to spread by God's grace, despite all the schemes devised to stop its march and undermine it, and the persecution of Islamic revivalist movements everywhere at the hands of other 'heroes' Zionism and imperialism create.

This religion will continue to have other roles to fulfil in the life of humanity. It will prevail in fulfilment of God's promise. Human efforts cannot stop God's will, no matter how powerful they may be or how wicked their schemes of misrepresentation are.

These verses served as motivation to the believers to carry the trust for which God has chosen them, after it was abandoned by the Jews and Christians who were not true to it. These verses reassure the believers that they are simply the means of fulfilling God's will. They continue to provide such motivation and reassurance to new believers who are certain that God's promise will always come true. They will give new generations the same motives and reassurance until God's promise comes to be fulfilled in people's real life once more, God willing.

A Most Profitable Bargain

When the history of faith has thus been outlined and the inevitable triumph the final version of the divine faith has been promised, the Qur'ān addresses the believers – those living at the time and those of later generations – offering them the bargain of their lives. This is a transaction in which the merchandise is faith and the means to achieve it is *Jihād*:

> *Believers! Shall I point out to you a bargain that will save you from grievous suffering? You are to believe in God and His Messenger, and to strive hard in God's cause with your possessions and your lives. This is for your own good, if you but knew it. He will forgive you your sins, and [in the life to come] will admit you into gardens through which running waters flow, and into goodly mansions in the gardens of Eden. That is the supreme triumph! And [He will grant you] yet another thing that you dearly love: help from God and a victory soon to come. Give you the good news to the believers.* (Verses 10–13)

The style employed here uses a variety of forms, such as splitting sentences and reconnecting them, putting forward a question and providing the answer, inversion and transposition all aiming to drive a certain message home. The address starts in the name of faith, "*Believers!*" It is followed by an inspiring question. It is God who puts the question and holds their expectation of an answer: "*Shall I point out to you a bargain that will save you from grievous suffering?*"

Who would not wish to know what this bargain is and what its terms are! Yet here the verse ends, providing a break between two sentences to add to the expectation. The answer is given when interest in it has been heightened: "*You are to believe in God and His Messenger.*" Since they were truly believers in God and His Messenger, they are happy that this part of the answer is already met by them. "*And to strive hard in God's cause with your possessions and your lives.*" This is the main theme of the *sūrah*, and it is given here in this particular fashion to reiterate a message that has already been clarified. God knows that human beings need such repetition and variety of modes and styles in order to rise to the occasion. Realizing this, they will exert their maximum efforts to establish and preserve the divine system.

The *sūrah* goes further, presenting the bargain in an even more attractive way: "*This is for your own good, if you but knew it.*" Knowledge of the truth will encourage the person who knows it to try to obtain this beneficial matter. But the thing that is referred to as being good for us is given in more detail in the next verse. This again heightens the effect even further; providing the details after a general statement drives the point home and makes it even more desirable. "*He will forgive you your sins.*" On its own, this is more than enough. Who would need any further reward when he is assured of God's forgiveness? Who would begrudge anything if he is certain to obtain God's forgiveness? But God's grace has no limit, for the reward also includes something for the life to come. God "*will admit you into gardens through which running waters flow, and into goodly mansions in the gardens of Eden.*" This is the most profitable bargain of all, because all that is needed for this deal to be concluded is that a believer should fight for God's cause during his short life on earth. Even if this means him losing his life in this fight, he will be compensated for it with heaven and these goodly mansions where he lives in permanent bliss. "*That is the supreme triumph!*"

The account of this transaction appears to conclude here. It is indeed a highly profitable bargain which the believer makes, bartering the life of this world for that of the hereafter. A person who receives a profit ten times his capital will be the envy of everyone in the marketplace. What about one who puts up a few days of life on earth and its limited and narrow comforts to earn an eternal life with God in pure happiness and enjoyment that knows no end?

The deal was concluded between the Prophet (peace be upon him) and 'Abdullāh ibn Rawāḥah on the night when the Anṣār (the Prophet's Companions from Madīnah) pledged their support to him. 'Abdullāh said to the Prophet: "Make whatever conditions you wish, for yourself and for your Lord." He said: "My condition for my Lord is that you worship Him alone, associating no partners with Him. And my condition for myself is that you pledge you will protect me as you protect your own womenfolk and children." 'Abdullāh said: "What will our reward be if we honour our commitments?" The Prophet said: "Paradise." They said: "It is a profitable bargain. We will never seek release from our commitments, nor do we accept any cancellation."

God's grace is limitless. He knows that human beings always look for something close, in this world, which fits human nature. Therefore, He gives them the happy news of what He has determined of making this religion of Islam prevail in this world, and making its system and code triumph in the life of that same generation: "*And [He will grant you] yet another thing that you dearly love: help from God and a victory soon to come. Give you the good news to the believers.*" (Verse 13)

At this point, the bargain attains the point of supreme returns which only God, whose stores are endless, and whose grace is interminable, can give. What He gives in return, then, are forgiveness, heaven, goodly dwelling and eternal bliss, but in addition to all such profits He gives a soon-to-happen victory. Who would hold back, hesitate when God tells him of this bargain?

With all this temptation and goodly prospects, a thought may well occur to us. A believer who knows the Islamic concept of life and the universe, and appreciates the great horizons this concept opens up before us, and then looks at life without faith, with its narrow concerns and lowly levels, cannot tolerate life without faith even for a moment. He

will not hesitate for a second in joining the struggle for God's cause in order to establish the great concept of faith in real life, so that he may live with the rest of mankind in its superior reality. It may be that he would not need to have any reward other than such a life, because the struggle for God's cause is, in itself, a reward, giving us contentment and happiness in this life. Moreover, such a believer cannot live in a world devoid of faith, and cannot sit idle, not striving to establish a world governed by faith. Thus, he is strongly motivated to struggle, no matter what happens to him as a result.

Echoing Jesus' Appeal

God, however, knows that people may slacken, and that enthusiasm may dampen, efforts may wane and love of safety may lead people to accept the *status quo*, even though its level is too low. Hence, the Qur'ān administers this treatment, providing motivation and images to enhance feelings and enthusiasm, making use of every occasion and possible means to appeal to human hearts and souls. It does not rely merely on faith or on one mode of address in the name of this faith. Hence, the *sūrah* ends with a new and distinctive address, and one that carries new appeal:

> *Believers! Be helpers [in the cause] of God; just as Jesus, the son of Mary, said to the disciples: 'Who will be my helpers in God's cause?' The disciples said: 'We shall be [your] helpers in God's cause.' And so some of the Children of Israel came to believe whereas others denied the truth. But We have given those who believed strength over their enemy and they were the ones to prevail.* (Verse 14)

The disciples were Jesus Christ's pupils. It is said that they were 12 men who were close to him and who dedicated themselves to learning from him. They continued to spread his message and commandments after his term was over. This verse does not give us a detailed story: it simply outlines an attitude. Hence, we look at it in the context it is given and for the purpose it serves.

"*Believers! Be helpers [in the cause] of God.*" (Verse 14) Place yourselves in this noble position to which He elevates you. Is there a position that

is higher and more noble than that of being a supporter of God and His cause? This bargain bestows an honour that is greater than heaven and its happiness: be helpers of God, "*just as Jesus, the son of Mary, said to the disciples: 'Who will be my helpers in God's cause?' The disciples said: 'We shall be [your] helpers in God's cause.'*" (Verse 14) They were chosen for this task and earned this honour. Jesus came to give the news of the last Prophet and the last religion. It is only fitting that Muḥammad's followers should be chosen for this permanent task, just as Christ's disciples were chosen for it during their period of time. This is clearly apparent in the way the dialogue is presented in this verse.

But what was the result then? "*Some of the Children of Israel came to believe whereas others denied the truth. But We have given those who believed strength over their enemy and they were the ones to prevail.*" (Verse 14) This statement may be interpreted in one of two ways: either the believers in Christ's message are all Christians, whether they remained faithful to its original form or they are those whose faith was subject to distortion. God supported them over the Jews who did not believe in Him at all, as known from history. Or the believers were only those who continued to believe in God's oneness in defiance of those who gave Jesus divine status, those who believed in the Trinity, or those who deviated in some other way. The believers prevailed in argument, giving irrefutable evidence. Alternatively, we may understand the verse as meaning that those who continued to believe in God's oneness were supported by the last religion that endorsed their beliefs. God has made the final victory assured to this religion, as happened in history. This last sense is perhaps the most probable.

The aim of this last address is to strengthen the resolve of the believers in the last religion, the heirs of the divine message. They are the ones charged with a great task, namely the implementation of God's system on earth. They are encouraged to come forward to support God's cause: "*just as Jesus, the son of Mary, said to the disciples: 'Who will be my helpers in God's cause?' The disciples said: 'We shall be [your] helpers in God's cause.'*" Eventual victory is assured for believers who support God's cause.

Thus the *sūrah* concludes with a verse that fits the general context and drift of the *sūrah*, yet has a special colour and effect. It enriches an already rich variety of colours and effects.

SŪRAH 62

Al-Jumu'ah

(The Congregation)

Prologue

This *sūrah* was revealed after *Sūrah* 61, The Ranks, and whilst both deal with the same theme, the current chapter nonetheless takes a different approach, using a different style and different effects. It aims to drive home to the Muslim community in Madīnah that it has been chosen to undertake responsibility for the divine faith. It wants the Muslim community to understand that to be in such a position of trust is a great favour God has bestowed on it. It also wants them to understand that by God choosing His last Messenger from among the Arabs is yet another great favour, one that merits a proper expression of gratitude to God. In this context, the *sūrah* provides certain duties that must be fulfilled by the people who responded to God's Messenger and who accepted the trust. Both the community and the trust are to continue across generations, without fail, because God has determined that the seed planted by the Prophet will continue to grow. The Muslim community has taken over the trust abandoned and neglected by the Children of Israel. They severed their relation with heaven so as to carry the Torah in the same way as an ass would carry books.

The *sūrah* drives this fundamental truth home to Muslims in general, starting in particular with the first Muslim community in Madīnah, which was responsible for implementing a practical model of the Islamic

system. It also applies to all future Muslim generations, as the *sūrah* clearly indicates.

At the same time, the *sūrah* addresses certain situations relevant to that first Muslim community, during its long and elaborate transformation process in accordance with Islamic requirements. This process involved the elimination of a host of hindrances, such as a keenness to make quick material gains and other temptations relating to money. These were to be replaced by proper awareness of the great trust assigned to the Muslim community. The *sūrah* also refers to a particular incident when the Prophet was once delivering his Friday sermon. A trade caravan had arrived at the same time, and the moment people learned of this, they left the mosque to take part in the music and entertainment that traditionally accompanied a caravan's arrival. According to some reports, only 12 of the Prophet's Companions, including Abū Bakr and 'Umar, remained listening to his sermon. Whilst these reports may not be very accurate as regards the numbers they mention, nonetheless the departure of some people from the mosque was certain. Hence, it merited this mention in the Qur'ān.

This incident demonstrates the great effort exerted in the cultivation of that first Muslim community's fine manners and behaviour, this until it achieved a lofty standard, making it a unique example in the history of Islam and mankind generally. In this way, the *sūrah* teaches us to always remain patient when we try to build the Islamic character in any community.

The *sūrah* also includes an invitation to the Jews to a mutual prayer wishing death for those who advocate falsehood. This comes in reply to their claims that they were God's only friends and His chosen people and that God's Messenger must be one of them. The *sūrah* confirms their unwillingness to accept such an invitation because they felt that the Muslims' claims were unfounded. The *sūrah* comments that death, from which such people try to escape, will inevitably catch up with them. They will be returned to God who knows all, and He will tell them the truth of their doings. This statement does not, however, only apply to the Jews. Rather, the *sūrah* facilitates its appreciation by believers as well. They too must realize this fact in order to be able to discharge the duties assigned to them as advocates of God's message.

I

The Day of Congregation

Al-Jumu ʿah
(The Congregation)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

All that is in the heavens and all that is on earth extol the limitless glory of God, the Sovereign, the Holy, the Almighty, the Wise. (1)

يُسَبِّحُ لِلَّهِ مَا فِي ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَمَا فِي ٱلْأَرْضِ ٱلْمَلِكِ ٱلْقُدُّوسِ ٱلْعَزِيزِ ٱلْحَكِيمِ ﴿١﴾

It is He who has sent to the unlettered people a Messenger from among themselves to declare to them His revelations, to purify them and to instruct them in the Book and in wisdom, yet before that they were indeed in manifest error, (2)

هُوَ ٱلَّذِي بَعَثَ فِي ٱلْأُمِّيِّـۧنَ رَسُولًا مِّنْهُمْ يَتْلُوا۟ عَلَيْهِمْ ءَايَٰتِهِۦ وَيُزَكِّيهِمْ وَيُعَلِّمُهُمُ ٱلْكِتَٰبَ وَٱلْحِكْمَةَ وَإِن كَانُوا۟ مِن قَبْلُ لَفِي ضَلَٰلٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٢﴾

to them and to others yet to join them. He is indeed the Almighty, the Wise. (3)

وَءَاخَرِينَ مِنْهُمْ لَمَّا يَلْحَقُوا۟ بِهِمْ ۚ وَهُوَ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلْحَكِيمُ ﴿٣﴾

Such is God's favour: He grants it to whom He will. God is One who bestows great favours. (4)

ذَٰلِكَ فَضْلُ ٱللَّهِ يُؤْتِيهِ مَن يَشَآءُ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ
ذُو ٱلْفَضْلِ ٱلْعَظِيمِ ﴿٤﴾

Those who were entrusted with the burden of implementing the Torah but then failed to do so are like an ass that carries a load of books. Wretched is the example of those who deny God's revelations. God does not guide the wrongdoers. (5)

مَثَلُ ٱلَّذِينَ حُمِّلُوا۟ ٱلتَّوْرَىٰةَ ثُمَّ لَمْ
يَحْمِلُوهَا كَمَثَلِ ٱلْحِمَارِ يَحْمِلُ
أَسْفَارًۢا ۚ بِئْسَ مَثَلُ ٱلْقَوْمِ ٱلَّذِينَ كَذَّبُوا۟
بِـَٔايَٰتِ ٱللَّهِ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ لَا يَهْدِى ٱلْقَوْمَ
ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ﴿٥﴾

Say: 'You who follow the Jewish faith! If you truly claim that out of all people you are God's friends, then wish for death, if your claim is true.' (6)

قُلْ يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ هَادُوٓا۟ إِن زَعَمْتُمْ أَنَّكُمْ
أَوْلِيَآءُ لِلَّهِ مِن دُونِ ٱلنَّاسِ فَتَمَنَّوُا۟
ٱلْمَوْتَ إِن كُنتُمْ صَٰدِقِينَ ﴿٦﴾

But they will never wish for it because of what their hands have wrought in this life. God is well aware of the wrongdoers. (7)

وَلَا يَتَمَنَّوْنَهُۥٓ أَبَدًۢا بِمَا قَدَّمَتْ أَيْدِيهِمْ ۚ
وَٱللَّهُ عَلِيمٌۢ بِٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ﴿٧﴾

Say: 'The death from which you are trying to run away will certainly overtake you. You will then be returned to the One who knows the imperceptible and that which can be witnessed. He will then tell you all that you have done.' (8)

قُلْ إِنَّ ٱلْمَوْتَ ٱلَّذِى تَفِرُّونَ مِنْهُ
فَإِنَّهُۥ مُلَٰقِيكُمْ ۖ ثُمَّ تُرَدُّونَ إِلَىٰ عَٰلِمِ
ٱلْغَيْبِ وَٱلشَّهَٰدَةِ فَيُنَبِّئُكُم بِمَا كُنتُمْ
تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٨﴾

Believers! When the call to prayer is made on Friday, go straightaway to the prayer and leave off your trading. This is best for you, if you but knew it. (9)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓاْ إِذَا نُودِيَ لِلصَّلَوٰةِ
مِن يَوۡمِ ٱلۡجُمُعَةِ فَٱسۡعَوۡاْ إِلَىٰ ذِكۡرِ ٱللَّهِ
وَذَرُواْ ٱلۡبَيۡعَۚ ذَٰلِكُمۡ خَيۡرٞ لَّكُمۡ إِن كُنتُمۡ
تَعۡلَمُونَ ٩

When the prayer is finished, disperse in the land and seek God's bounty. Remember God often so that you may be successful. (10)

فَإِذَا قُضِيَتِ ٱلصَّلَوٰةُ فَٱنتَشِرُواْ فِي
ٱلۡأَرۡضِ وَٱبۡتَغُواْ مِن فَضۡلِ ٱللَّهِ وَٱذۡكُرُواْ
ٱللَّهَ كَثِيرٗا لَّعَلَّكُمۡ تُفۡلِحُونَ ١٠

Yet when people see some trade or entertainment, they head off towards it, leaving you standing there. Say: 'That which is with God is far better than any entertainment or trade. God is the best of providers.' (11)

وَإِذَا رَأَوۡاْ تِجَٰرَةً أَوۡ لَهۡوًا ٱنفَضُّوٓاْ
إِلَيۡهَا وَتَرَكُوكَ قَآئِمٗاۚ قُلۡ مَا عِندَ ٱللَّهِ
خَيۡرٞ مِّنَ ٱللَّهۡوِ وَمِنَ ٱلتِّجَٰرَةِۚ وَٱللَّهُ
خَيۡرُ ٱلرَّٰزِقِينَ ١١

A Universal Glorification

> *All that is in the heavens and all that is on earth extol the limitless glory of God, the Sovereign, the Holy, the Almighty, the Wise.* (Verse 1)

The *sūrah* starts with a statement confirming the fact that everything in the heavens and earth extols God's glory, adding a number of His attributes that have a subtle bearing on the theme of the *sūrah*. The *sūrah* is given the name *al-Jumu'ah*, meaning Friday, and it gives instructions about the special congregational prayer on that day, identifying that its time should be dedicated to remembrance of God. All distractions and business should be abandoned in pursuit of what is with God, which is better than everything else. Hence, the *sūrah* mentions God's attribute, the Sovereign, who owns everything. This is relevant to business, since

all trade normally seeks profit. The *sūrah* also states that God is Holy; He who is revered and glorified by all creatures in the universe. This attribute of God's contrasts with the entertainment mortals seek, distracting them from His remembrance. This opening verse also mentions that God is Almighty, which is relevant to the invitation made to the Jews for mutual prayer, and also to the death that is bound to happen to all. The last of God's attributes mentioned in this opening is His wisdom. Such divine wisdom determined the choice of the unlettered people from among whom God's last Messenger was selected to declare to them God's revelations, purify them and teach them the scriptures and wisdom.

The Messenger's Terms of Reference

Having started with this sublime glorification of God's limitless glory, the *sūrah* goes straight to its main theme:

> *It is He who has sent to the unlettered people a Messenger from among themselves to declare to them His revelations, to purify them and to instruct them in the Book and in wisdom, yet before that they were indeed in manifest error, to them and to others yet to join them. He is indeed the Almighty, the Wise.* (Verses 2–3)

It is said that the Arabs were called *ummiyyūn*, or 'unlettered', because the great majority of them could neither read nor write. It is reported that the Prophet once defined how many days there are in a month, joining his two hands and pointing with his ten fingers three times, and saying: "We are an unlettered community: we neither reckon figures nor write." It is also said that a person who does not write is called *ummī*, meaning he is the same as when his mother, or *umm*, gave birth to him. Writing is something that is only learnt when a child grows up.

Alternatively, the Arabs might have been called Goyim, a Hebrew form by which the Jews called all non-Jews, and meaning Gentiles. Thus the word *ummiyyūn* becomes a form of *umamiyyūn*, which means 'belonging to other communities or nations'. Thus they distinguished themselves as God's chosen people, while the rest of mankind are Gentiles. Perhaps this suggestion is closer to the theme of the *sūrah*.

The Jews were awaiting a final Messenger from God who would arise from among themselves, uniting them after they had been divided into divergent groups, giving them power and leading them to victory. They used to tell the Arabs that he was soon to come. In His infinite wisdom, God chose an Arab as His last Messenger, i.e. a Gentile, because He knew that the Jews no longer had the qualities necessary to provide mankind's new leadership. Indeed, they had long deviated and were deep in error, as stated in *Sūrah* 61, The Ranks. Hence, they were no longer capable of being entrusted with God's message.

Moreover, in earlier times Abraham and his son Ishmael had said a prayer as they worked on building the Ka'bah: "*Our Lord, accept this from us; You are the One that hears all and knows all. Our Lord, make us surrender ourselves to You, and make out of our offspring a community that will surrender itself to You. Show us our ways of worship and accept our repentance; You are the One who accepts repentance, the Merciful. Our Lord, send them a Messenger from among themselves who shall declare to them Your revelations, and instruct them in the Book and in wisdom, and purify them. You are Mighty and Wise.*" (2: 127–129) Addressed centuries earlier, this prayer remained with God to be answered at the appropriate time, according to God's wisdom. Only then would it fulfil its role within the overall plan God has set in place for the universe. In this plan nothing occurs earlier or later than its appropriate time.

This prayer was answered in its exact wording, which is repeated here in this *sūrah*, reminding us of Abraham's own words: "*A Messenger from among themselves to declare to them His revelations, to purify them and to instruct them in the Book and in wisdom.*" (Verse 2). Even God's attributes mentioned in Abraham's prayer are used at the end of these verses to remind the Muslim community of God's favours: "*He is indeed the Almighty, the Wise.*" (Verse 3)

When the Prophet was asked about himself, his answer was: "I am the answer to Abraham's, my father's, prayer, and the good news given by Jesus. When my mother was pregnant, she saw a light coming out of her, lighting before her the palaces of Buṣrā in Syria."

"*It is He who has sent to the unlettered people a Messenger from among themselves to declare to them His revelations, to purify them and to instruct them in the Book and in wisdom, yet before that they were indeed in manifest*

error." (Verse 2) The favour God has granted to these unlettered people is evident: He chose them to hold the trust embodied in His final message and sent them a Messenger from among themselves to elevate them to a noble position. He took them out of their state of ignorance, highlighted in their being unlettered, giving them instructions in God's book and in wisdom. Thus, their situation changed completely, clearly making them distinguished among all other people on earth.

"*To purify them.*" What the Prophet gave them was far-reaching purification. He purified their feelings and consciences, their actions and behaviour, their marital and family lives as also their social lives. Their purification meant that they rose from the depths of idolatrous beliefs to believing in God's oneness, from erroneous concepts and enigmatic legends to the true and clear faith, from disgraceful immorality to the clean moral values propounded by Islam, from the filthy gains of usury and fraud to clean and legitimate earnings. It was a total purification of the individual and the community, of inner feelings and outward life. Such purification elevates man and his concepts, his role and existence to the high horizon of maintaining his bond with God and with the community on high.

"*To instruct them in the Book and in wisdom.*" When they are thus instructed, they become the holders of a divine book. They thus learn how to evaluate matters properly. They can also make accurate judgements and define their course in life in the light of such wisdom.

"*Yet before that they were indeed in manifest error.*" (Verse 2) During their pre-Islamic days, they were certainly in manifest error. Their situation is best described by Ja'far ibn Abī Ṭālib when he was questioned about Islam by Negus, the King of Abyssinia. A number of Muslims had migrated there when the Prophet wanted to establish a new base for Islam. The Quraysh, in turn, had also sent a delegation led by 'Amr ibn al-'Āṣ to request their extradition. 'Amr tried to paint a distorted picture of the Muslim immigrants to the king, but the Negus wanted to listen to their version. In this context, Ja'far said to him:

> In our recent past we were ignorant people: we worshipped idols, ate carrion, committed all sorts of sins, attached little value to maintaining good relations with our kinsfolk and behaved badly

to our neighbours. Our overruling maxim was that might was right. This continued to be our situation until God sent us, from among ourselves, a Messenger whose good name, honesty, sincerity and integrity were well known to us. He called on us to believe in God, the one and only God, and to stop worshipping all idols which we and our forefathers used to worship alongside Him. He commanded us always to speak the truth and be honest, to be good to our relatives and neighbours, to preserve life and shed no blood, to refrain from sin, perjury, robbing the property of orphans entrusted to our care, and making false accusations against honourable women. He also commanded us to devote our worship to God alone, ascribing to Him no partners of any sort. He further commanded us to pray regularly, to give away certain purifying alms and to fast, etc.[1]

Worthy of Trust

Despite all their negative qualities during their pre-Islamic days, God knew that the Arabs were the ones to be entrusted with the new faith and that they would be true to their trust. He was also aware of their great potential once they were put on the right way. They could use all this potential for their new faith, whereas the Israelites no longer had it. The latter had endured humiliation for a long time in Egypt under Pharaonic rule. As a result they portrayed many aspects of deviation and ill feeling. Indeed, they were unable to rid themselves of these negative effects, whether during Moses' lifetime, or later. Hence, they incurred God's anger and deserved to be expelled from His grace. He, therefore, removed the trust of His faith from them for the rest of human life.

In His perfect and absolute knowledge, God knew that the Arabian Peninsula was the best cradle for His new faith. This was a faith that aimed to liberate the whole world from the erroneous ways of ignorance and rid it of the decadence that had eaten deep into the great civilizations,

1. Adil Salahi, *Muhammad: Man and Prophet*, The Islamic Foundation, Leicestershire, 2002, p. 129.

leaving them hollow. At that time, the state of the world was very low, as described by J.H. Denison, a European writer:

> In the fifth and sixth centuries the civilized world stood on the verge of chaos. The old emotional cultures that had made civilization possible, since they had given to men a sense of unity and of reverence for their rulers, had broken down, and nothing had been found adequate to take their place...
>
> It seemed then that the great civilization that it had taken four thousand years to construct was on the verge of disintegration, and that mankind was likely to return to that condition of barbarism where every tribe and sect was against the next, and law and order were unknown. *The old tribal sanctions had lost their power. Hence the old imperial methods would no longer operate.* The new sanctions created by Christianity were working division and destruction instead of unity and order. It was a time fraught with tragedy. Civilization, like a gigantic tree whose foliage had overreached the world and whose branches had borne the golden fruits of art and science and literature, stood tottering, its trunk no longer alive with the flowing sap of devotion and reverence, but rotted to the core...
>
> It was among these people that the man was born who was to unite the whole known world of the east and south... Mohammed...[2]

This is the view of an European author, but from the Islamic perspective, conditions looked far darker and gloomier. God chose a Bedouin nation in a largely desert peninsula to be entrusted with His faith, knowing that once put on the right course, their mentality

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2. Denison, J.H., *Emotion as the Basis of Civilization*, New York and London, 1928, pp. 265–269.

– This quotation runs in the Arabic text as one continuous paragraph. Apparently, the author relied on a quoted text in a book by an Indian author which was translated into Arabic. It may be that the original quotation was an abridged one, and it may be that when it was translated, some variation of emphasis occurred in places. The italicized sentence is omitted in the Arabic text, but it was felt necessary to include it here in order not to affect the flow of the author's meaning. – Editor's note.

and qualities would enable them to shoulder this great responsibility. Moreover, they had the potential to willingly deliver great sacrifices for their faith. Therefore, He raised His last Messenger among them, to recite His revelations to them, purify them and instruct them in His book and in wisdom, thus ridding them of all traces of their old, greatly erroneous ways.

"*To them and to others yet to join them.*" (Verse 3) We have several reports explaining who these others are. Al-Bukhārī relates on Abū Hurayrah's authority: "We were sitting with the Prophet when *Sūrah al-Jumu'ah*, or The Congregation, was revealed to him, including the statement, '*to them and to others yet to join them*'. People asked who were these, but the Prophet did not answer until they had repeated their question three times. Salmān the Persian was among us. The Prophet put his hand on Salmān and said: 'Were faith to be at the top of the sky, some people or a man from among his community would attain it'." This authentic *ḥadīth* makes clear that this Qur'ānic statement includes the Persians. Hence, in his commentary on this verse, Mujāhid says: "This is a reference to all non-Arabs who believe in the Prophet."

Another *ḥadīth* is reported by Sahl ibn Sa'd who quotes the Prophet as saying: "Among the seed of the seed of the seed of men and women in my community there are some who will be admitted into heaven without having to face any reckoning of their deeds. He then quoted the verse that says: '*to them and to others yet to join them*'." This means that these belong to much later generations of Muslims.

Both these interpretations are valid. The Qur'ānic statement refers to people other than the Arabs, and to ones other than the generation that witnessed the revelation of the Qur'ān. It indicates that the Muslim community transcends both geographical area and generational context. It continues to be true to its great trust, faithful to the full form of the divine faith.

"*He is indeed the Almighty, the Wise.*" (Verse 3) He is able to choose as He pleases, and in His wisdom He is fully aware of the most appropriate choices. His choice, of both the earlier and the later generations, means a great honour to those thus chosen: "*Such is God's favour: He grants it to whom He will. God is One who bestows great favours.*" (Verse 4)

God's choice of a community or an individual to be responsible for the great truth, to receive the light that emanates from Him, to be the link between the earth and heaven, is a favour of unparalleled proportions. It exceeds by far any sacrifices such an individual or community may give, in wealth, effort and life. It outweighs all the trouble they may undertake, the opposition they have to encounter and the hard struggle they have to endure. God thus reminds the Muslim community in Madīnah, as well as those who will come after it, of the great favour He has granted them when He chose them for this task, sending them a Messenger to purify them and instruct them in the divine book and in wisdom. God's Messenger also left a great wealth of wisdom for future generations, whereby they learn from the practical example of that first Muslim community.

One Role Ended

The *sūrah* then adds a statement that implies that the Israelites' role as trustees of God's message has ended. Their hearts are no longer alert, dedicated and active enough to enable them to live up to the trust they were once given:

> *Those who were entrusted with the burden of implementing the Torah but then failed to do so are like an ass that carries a load of books. Wretched is the example of those who deny God's revelations. God does not guide the wrongdoers.* (Verse 5)

The Israelites were entrusted with the Torah, and charged with being true to the faith and the divine law, but they '*failed to do so*'. The initial duty of this trust is to formulate a thorough and correct understanding of the divine message, and then to implement it both within one's own life and in human life at large. Yet the history of the Israelites, as it was in the true picture painted in the Qur'ān, indicates that they did not appreciate the trust given to them. They neither understood its nature nor were they true to it. As such, they were like the example given in the *sūrah*: "*Like an ass that carries a load of books*". The ass benefits nothing by the books it carries. It only feels their heavy load. This is a miserable picture, but

it represents a true situation: "*Wretched is the example of those who deny God's revelations. God does not guide the wrongdoers.*" (Verse 5)

Likewise are all those who were given the trust of divine faith but who failed to live up to it. Muslims across many generations, as well as those living today, who have Muslim names but who fail to live up to what Islam requires, and particularly those who read the Qur'ān and Islamic books but fall short of what is required of them, are indeed like the ass carrying a load of heavy books. Unfortunately, these are numerous. The question is not that of books being carried: it is a question of understanding the books and putting into practice the teachings they impart.

The Israelites used always to allege that they were God's chosen people and His beloved race, while all others are Goyim or Gentiles. They claimed that in their position they were not required to observe the laws of their own religion in their dealings with the rest of mankind: "*For they say: "We have no obligation to keep faith with Gentiles." Thus they deliberately say of God what they know to be a lie.*" (3: 75) They made many other false allegations, providing no evidence in support of them. Therefore, the *sūrah* invites them to make a mutual prayer. This invitation was also made on other occasions to Christian and pagan groups:

> *Say: 'You who follow the Jewish faith! If you truly claim that out of all people you are God's friends, then wish for death, if your claim is true.' But they will never wish for it because of what their hands have wrought in this life. God is well aware of the wrongdoers. Say: 'The death from which you are trying to run away will certainly overtake you. You will then be returned to the One who knows the imperceptible and that which can be witnessed. He will then tell you all that you have done.'* (Verses 6–8)

What this invitation entails is that the two groups stand together face to face and they all pray to God to inflict punishment on the group upholding falsehood. All groups the Prophet invited to such mutual prayer feared to do so; essentially, they refused to take up the challenge. This indicates that deep inside they realized that what the Prophet said was the truth and that his faith was true. "Ibn 'Abbās reports that Abū

Jahl once said: 'If I see Muḥammad praying at the Ka'bah, I will go to him and put my foot on his neck.' When the Prophet heard this, he said: 'Had he tried to do so, the angels would have taken him away in broad daylight. Had the Jews wished for death, they would have died and seen their places in hell.' Also true is that had those invited to mutual prayer stood against the Prophet in such prayer, they would have returned home to find their families and properties perished." [Related by Aḥmad, al-Bukhārī, al-Nasā'ī and al-Tirmidhī.]

These verses may only represent a challenge to them, rather than an invitation to mutual prayer. Since they alleged that they were God's only friends among all mankind, why would they fear death, and reveal themselves to be so cowardly? If their claims were true, they would be in a position of favour with God after they die. So why does the prospect of death fill them with fear? This challenge is followed by a statement making it clear that their claims were untrue. They were aware that they had not done enough good deeds to ensure a good position with God or to hope for His reward. On the contrary, they often indulged in sin, and such indulgences made them fear death and what comes after it. A person who has not prepared for his journey will always be in fear of what may happen along the road: "*But they will never wish for it because of what their hands have wrought in this life. God is well aware of the wrongdoers.*" (Verse 7)

A statement follows that establishes the nature of death and what comes after it. It shows them that their attempts to escape from death are of little use. It will inevitably overtake them. After death, all will return to God where they will have their deeds reckoned and where they will face the consequences of the same: "*Say: 'The death from which you are trying to run away will certainly overtake you. You will then be returned to the One who knows the imperceptible and that which can be witnessed. He will then tell you all that you have done.'*" (Verses 8)

This Qur'ānic statement makes clear to the addressees and to everyone else the truth that people often overlook and prefer not to think about, despite facing it all the time: namely, this life is bound to end. To stay away from God during one's lifetime will not avert a person from returning to Him, for there is no refuge from God except by returning to Him. The reckoning of everyone's deeds will inevitably follow this

return. There is simply no escape. The Prophet is quoted as saying: "A person who tries to run away from death is like a fox who owes a debt to the earth. He went out roaming until he was exhausted and bleeding. When he went into his hole, the earth said to him: 'Fox! Repay the debt you owe me.' He went out again wounded. He continued to bleed and his neck was cut. He then died." [Related by al-Ṭabarī.] This *ḥadīth* so delivers a highly moving and effective picture.

The Congregation on Friday

The last section of the *sūrah* provides certain teachings concerning Friday and its congregational prayer. It refers to an event that might have been repeated; given the way it is described suggests such repetition:

> *Believers! When the call to prayer is made on Friday, go straightaway to the prayer and leave off your trading. This is best for you, if you but knew it. When the prayer is finished, disperse in the land and seek God's bounty. Remember God often so that you may be successful. Yet when people see some trade or entertainment, they head off towards it, leaving you standing there. Say: 'That which is with God is far better than any entertainment or trade. God is the best of providers.'* (Verses 9–11)

Friday Prayer is a weekly prayer that must be offered in congregation. It cannot be offered by anyone on his own. Muslims meet in Friday Prayer and listen to a sermon that reminds them of their duties towards God. We can say that it is an organizational prayer, following the Islamic method of preparing for this life and the life to come together by the same measures and the same acts of worship. Friday Prayer gives a clear and specific impression of the nature of the Islamic faith and the Muslim community, which we explained in our commentary on the previous *sūrah*, The Ranks.

There are many *aḥādīth* that speak of the value, importance and special position of this prayer, encouraging its observation after preparing for it by undertaking specific cleanliness and purification rituals. Ibn 'Umar quotes the Prophet as saying: "When any of you wishes to attend Friday

Prayer, he should take a bath." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] Aws ibn Aws quotes the Prophet as saying: "Whoever washes himself and takes a bath on Friday, going out early, walking to the mosque rather than riding, draws close to the imam, listens and refrains from idle talk, will be rewarded for each step the equivalent of fasting and observing night prayer for a whole year." [Related by al-Nasā'ī, Abū Dāwūd, al-Tirmidhī and Ibn Mājah.] Imām Aḥmad reports on the authority of Abū Ayyūb al-Anṣārī that he heard the Prophet saying: "Whoever takes a bath on Friday, wears a touch of perfume if he has it, puts on some of his best clothes, goes out to the mosque where he offers voluntary prayers if he so wishes, doing no harm to anyone, listens to the imam when he delivers his sermon and then joins the prayer, all his sins between that prayer and the Friday before it will be forgiven."

The first verse in this section orders Muslims to leave off all business once they hear the call to prayer: "*Believers! When the call to prayer is made on Friday, go straightaway to the prayer and leave off your trading.*" (Verse 9) It provides encouragement for so abandoning anything related to the life of this world and its concerns: "*This is best for you, if you but knew it.*" (Verse 9) This suggests that leaving off trade and business was not easy; it required such encouragement. Moreover, it provides good and repeated education. Every now and then, people need a period of time when they free themselves from their preoccupation with earning a living and the attractions of worldly life. They need such periods when they can be in close contact with their Lord, glorifying Him and experiencing the happiness resulting from dedication to His service. They need to fill their hearts and lungs with the pure, clean and refreshing air that comes with such dedication.

When they have done so, they can then return to their business, continuing to remember God: "*When the prayer is finished, disperse in the land and seek God's bounty. Remember God often so that you may be successful.*" (Verse 10) The Islamic system provides a perfect balance between the needs of life on earth, with all that it requires of work and effort, and the need to be away from all this for a short while to attend to worship. Time spent away from the preoccupations of this life is necessary to keep the heart alive. Without it, it cannot live up to the great trust God has given us and nor can it fulfil its duties. It is

important to remember God while we are busy earning our living, for such remembrance transforms our work activities into acts of worship. Nevertheless, we need such short periods of complete dedication to worship, as clearly implied in the last two verses.

'Irāk ibn Mālik, a Companion of the Prophet, used to stand near the door of the mosque after Friday Prayer and say: "My Lord! I have responded to Your call, offered the prayer You made obligatory, and I am dispersing as You have commanded me. Give me of Your bounty, for You are the best of providers." [Related by Ibn Abī Ḥātim.] These words show us how such a person treated the matter seriously but also in a very simple way. The verses give orders and these orders are carried out to the letter. Such a clear, simple and yet serious understanding is perhaps the secret behind the first Muslim community's rise to the high level it achieved, despite all the distractions it had to deal with, as described in the last verse: "*Yet when people see some trade or entertainment, they head off towards it, leaving you standing there. Say: 'That which is with God is far better than any entertainment or trade. God is the best of providers.*" (Verse 11)

Jābir ibn 'Abdullāh reports: "We were attending the prayer with the Prophet when a caravan carrying food arrived. People flocked to it, and only 12 men remained with the Prophet, including Abū Bakr and 'Umar. God then revealed the verse that says: '*Yet when people see some trade or entertainment, they head off towards it, leaving you standing there*'." The verse makes clear that what is with God is better than trade and entertainment. It reminds them that all that they have is provided by God who is the best of providers.

This event shows the great effort that was needed in order to mould the community that rose to the highest level achieved by any community of believers in human history. It also encourages those who advocate God's message in all generations to remain patient. They are bound to encounter weaknesses, for human beings often yield and fall prey to temptation. Yet they must remember that man is also able to rise to sublime standards of purity and dedication. What is needed to help such a rise is patience, proper understanding, perseverance and entertaining no thoughts of quitting midway.

SŪRAH 63

Al-Munāfiqūn

(The Hypocrites)

Prologue

Although the title *al-Munāfiqūn*, or The Hypocrites, indicates this *sūrah*'s subject matter, it is nonetheless not the only one that mentions hypocrisy and that describes the hypocrites' wicked scheming. Indeed, hardly any of the *sūrahs* revealed in Madīnah is without an express or implied reference to hypocrisy. However, the present *sūrah* is dedicated, almost entirely, to speaking about the hypocrites, referring to particular events and statements they made. The *sūrah* launches a strong attack against the hypocrites: their manners, lies, intrigue and wicked plots. It exposes their true feelings of hatred towards the Muslims, as also their cowardice and evil nature.

A warning is given at the end to the believers not to allow any of the characteristics of hypocrisy to creep near them. The first element of hypocrisy is not to be totally dedicated to God's cause, and to be instead preoccupied with money, property and children. Hypocrisy also entails slackening when invited to contribute financially to God's cause until a day comes when no such donation will be of any use.

The unbelievers' hypocrisy accelerated when Islam moved to Madīnah and continued to so grow until virtually the end of the Prophet's blessed life. Although evidence of such traits was almost uninterrupted, hypocrisy nonetheless acquired different aspects and

variously resorted to different tactics. Inevitably, such behaviour had a strong bearing on the events of the period, taking up much of the Muslim community's efforts, time and energy. Indeed, hypocrisy is frequently mentioned in the Qur'ān and *Ḥadīth*, thereby indicating how prevalent it had become.

In his biography of the Prophet, *Sīrat al-Rasūl: Ṣuwar Muqtabasah min al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*, Muḥammad Izzat Darwazah, devotes a fine chapter to this issue. The following paragraphs are especially revealing:

> There were obvious reasons for the phenomenon of hypocrisy to appear in Madīnah. The early Muslims in Makkah were neither strong enough nor influential enough to make a group of people fear them or try to appease them. Indeed, the people of Makkah, and its leaders and notables in particular, opposed the Prophet in a very open manner, inflicting much harm on the Muslims, and resorted to any measure within their means to check the new religion's advance In fact, they commanded much power. Because of this persecution the Muslims were subjected to some had to migrate to Abyssinia, and thereafter to Madīnah. In fact, some of them were subjected to such unbearable pressure that they had to renounce their faith: this as a result of either torture or the lure of temptation. So extreme did this become that a few even died under torture.
>
> In Madīnah, the situation was markedly different. Prior to his migration there, the Prophet was able to recruit a number of strong and influential followers from the two tribes of the Aws and the Khazraj. He migrated only after having made sure of the favourable situation there. Indeed, there was hardly an Arab house in Madīnah without its followers of Islam in the family. There were no doubt many who rejected Islam, either because they chose not to listen to its message or because they were full of hostility realizing that the Prophet's arrival in Madīnah threatened their position of leadership and influence. They realized, however, that they could not take an openly hostile attitude to the Prophet and his Muhājirīn and Anṣār followers. Moreover, tribal affiliation was an important factor preventing such open hostility. Indeed, the

broad majority of their own tribes, the Aws and the Khazraj, were now Muslim, giving sincere and devoted support to the Prophet. They were good Muslims who looked at the Prophet as their own supreme commander, and the guide they had to follow. Therefore, the ones who still entertained thoughts of idolatry and harboured rancour in their hearts, prompting them to seek to undermine Islam, felt that their only option was to pretend to be Muslim, appearing to fulfil their Islamic duties, declaring their continued loyalty to their tribes, while at the same time resorting to plots and intrigue. At times, however, their opposition did smack of hypocrisy, this usually when the Muslims faced some tough crisis, and here the 'pretenders' counselled caution, claiming that it was the only option that served Muslim interests. Needless to say, they did not acknowledge that they were in fact unbelievers. Nonetheless, their true attitude of hypocrisy did not go unnoticed by the Prophet and his Companions. Moreover, their stand at times of crises, counselling a policy of weakness, hardened them further in their hypocrisy and unbelief. Qur'ānic revelations time after time exposed and denounced their schemes, alerting the Prophet and the believers to the need to be very cautious in dealing with them.

The hypocrites' attitude and schemes had, according to the import of Qur'ānic revelations, a far-reaching effect. We feel that there was a determined struggle, reminiscent of that between the Prophet and the Makkan elders, but with a reversal in its outcome. Within a short period, the Prophet strengthened his position in Madīnah and his influence increased. Islam was spreading and consolidating its power base. The hypocrites were neither a solid group nor a clearly identified entity. As Islam was on the ascendancy, they grew weaker and thus their influence diminished.

To appreciate the threat posed by the hypocrites, particularly in the early period of Islam in Madīnah, we need to remember however that they could still call on tribal loyalties, which remained strong among the Arabs. Besides, they had not at this juncture exposed themselves. Nor had Islam as yet consolidated its influence on its new followers. Moreover, the Prophet was

surrounded by idolaters on all fronts. The people of Makkah continued to enjoy a position of great influence among the Arabs, and they were on the lookout for any chance to level a crushing defeat on the still fledgling Muslim State. The Jews in Madīnah were also not long in taking a hostile stance towards the Prophet and Islam. Indeed, they were quick to cement a natural alliance with the hypocrites, defining common objectives in opposition to the Muslim community. In fact, the hypocrites could not have caused so much harm to the Prophet and his followers had they not had the support of the Jews and the sort of alliance that the two groups forged. Nonetheless, their influence gradually weakened and the danger they represented subsided only after God foiled their schemes and enabled the Prophet to achieve victory over them.

Al-Munāfiqūn
(The Hypocrites)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

When the hypocrites come to you, they say, 'We bear witness that you are indeed God's Messenger.' God knows that you are truly His Messenger and He bears witness that the hypocrites are indeed liars. (1)

إِذَا جَآءَكَ ٱلْمُنَٰفِقُونَ قَالُوا۟ نَشْهَدُ إِنَّكَ لَرَسُولُ ٱللَّهِ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ يَعْلَمُ إِنَّكَ لَرَسُولُهُۥ وَٱللَّهُ يَشْهَدُ إِنَّ ٱلْمُنَٰفِقِينَ لَكَٰذِبُونَ ﴿١﴾

They use their oaths as a cover [for their falseness], and they turn people away from the path of God. Evil indeed is what they do. (2)

ٱتَّخَذُوٓا۟ أَيْمَٰنَهُمْ جُنَّةً فَصَدُّوا۟ عَن سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ ۚ إِنَّهُمْ سَآءَ مَا كَانُوا۟ يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٢﴾

That is because they professed to believe, then they renounced faith. So, a seal has been set on their hearts and therefore they are devoid of understanding. (3)

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ ءَامَنُوا۟ ثُمَّ كَفَرُوا۟ فَطُبِعَ عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِهِمْ فَهُمْ لَا يَفْقَهُونَ ﴿٣﴾

When you see them, their outward appearance may please you; and when they speak, you listen to what they say. They are like propped-up timbers. They think that every shout is directed against them. They are the real enemy; so beware of them. May God destroy them! How perverse they are! (4)

وَإِذَا رَأَيْتَهُمْ تُعْجِبُكَ أَجْسَامُهُمْ ۖ وَإِن يَقُولُوا۟ تَسْمَعْ لِقَوْلِهِمْ ۖ كَأَنَّهُمْ خُشُبٌ مُّسَنَّدَةٌ ۖ يَحْسَبُونَ كُلَّ صَيْحَةٍ عَلَيْهِمْ ۚ هُمُ ٱلْعَدُوُّ فَٱحْذَرْهُمْ ۚ قَٰتَلَهُمُ ٱللَّهُ ۖ أَنَّىٰ يُؤْفَكُونَ ﴿٤﴾

When they are told, 'Come, so that God's Messenger may ask forgiveness for you,' they turn their heads away. You see them drawing back in arrogance. (5)

وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمْ تَعَالَوْا يَسْتَغْفِرْ لَكُمْ
رَسُولُ ٱللَّهِ لَوَّوْا رُءُوسَهُمْ وَرَأَيْتَهُمْ
يَصُدُّونَ وَهُم مُّسْتَكْبِرُونَ ٥

As for them, it is all the same whether you pray for their forgiveness or you do not pray. God will not forgive them; for God does not bestow His guidance on such transgressor folk. (6)

سَوَآءٌ عَلَيْهِمْ أَسْتَغْفَرْتَ لَهُمْ أَمْ
لَمْ تَسْتَغْفِرْ لَهُمْ لَن يَغْفِرَ ٱللَّهُ لَهُمْ إِنَّ
ٱللَّهَ لَا يَهْدِى ٱلْقَوْمَ ٱلْفَٰسِقِينَ ٦

They are the ones who say [to one another]: 'Do not give anything to those who are with God's Messenger, so that they may abandon him.' To God belong the treasures of the heavens and the earth, but the hypocrites cannot understand. (7)

هُمُ ٱلَّذِينَ يَقُولُونَ لَا تُنفِقُوا عَلَىٰ مَنْ
عِندَ رَسُولِ ٱللَّهِ حَتَّىٰ يَنفَضُّوا وَلِلَّهِ
خَزَآئِنُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ وَلَٰكِنَّ
ٱلْمُنَٰفِقِينَ لَا يَفْقَهُونَ ٧

They say, 'When we return to Madīnah, the more honourable will surely drive out those who are contemptible.' All honour belongs to God, His Messenger and the believers, but the hypocrites do not know. (8)

يَقُولُونَ لَئِن رَّجَعْنَآ إِلَى ٱلْمَدِينَةِ
لَيُخْرِجَنَّ ٱلْأَعَزُّ مِنْهَا ٱلْأَذَلَّ وَلِلَّهِ
ٱلْعِزَّةُ وَلِرَسُولِهِۦ وَلِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ
وَلَٰكِنَّ ٱلْمُنَٰفِقِينَ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ٨

Believers! Do not let your riches or your children make you oblivious of the remembrance of God. Those who do so will surely be the losers. (9)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا لَا تُلْهِكُمْ أَمْوَٰلُكُمْ
وَلَآ أَوْلَٰدُكُمْ عَن ذِكْرِ ٱللَّهِ
وَمَن يَفْعَلْ ذَٰلِكَ فَأُولَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ
ٱلْخَٰسِرُونَ ٩

Give, then, out of what We have provided for you, before death comes to any of you, and then he says, 'My Lord, if You would grant me a delay for a short while, I would give in charity and be one of the righteous.' (10)

وَأَنفِقُوا۟ مِن مَّا رَزَقْنَـٰكُم مِّن قَبْلِ أَن
يَأْتِىَ أَحَدَكُمُ ٱلْمَوْتُ فَيَقُولَ رَبِّ
لَوْلَآ أَخَّرْتَنِىٓ إِلَىٰٓ أَجَلٍ قَرِيبٍ فَأَصَّدَّقَ
وَأَكُن مِّنَ ٱلصَّـٰلِحِينَ ﴿١٠﴾

God does not grant a delay to any soul when its term has come. God is fully aware of all that you do. (11)

وَلَن يُؤَخِّرَ ٱللَّهُ نَفْسًا إِذَا جَآءَ أَجَلُهَا ۚ
وَٱللَّهُ خَبِيرٌۢ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١١﴾

Ugly Hypocrisy

The *sūrah* begins with a description of the hypocrites' attempt to disguise the truth of their unbelief. They declare themselves Muslim and testify that the Prophet is God's Messenger. They swear by God so as to convince the Muslims, while they themselves know that they are lying. Their oaths are merely a shield behind which they hope to hide their true reality and deceive the Muslims:

> *When the hypocrites come to you, they say, 'We bear witness that you are indeed God's Messenger.' God knows that you are truly His Messenger and He bears witness that the hypocrites are indeed liars. They use their oaths as a cover [for their falseness], and they turn people away from the path of God. Evil indeed is what they do.* (Verses 1–2)

They would go to the Prophet and state that they bore witness that he was God's Messenger, but theirs was only a verbal testimony lacking all conviction. They were merely engaging in deception, hoping to hide their truth from the Muslim community and so protect themselves. Therefore, God states that they were lying while making clear the truth of His message to the Prophet Muḥammad: "*God knows that you are truly His Messenger and He bears witness that the hypocrites are indeed liars.*" (Verse 1)

The phraseology here is both precise and precautionary. We note how the verse begins by confirming the truth of the Prophet's message before it states that the hypocrites' oaths were false. Without taking such care in its wording, the verse could suggest that denunciation of the hypocrites as liars applies to the subject matter of their statement, namely the Prophet's message. The verse intends no such thing. What it aims to do is to state the truth, making it clear that they did not really believe that the Prophet's message was true. In other words, they are not sincere in their statement.

"*They use their oaths as a cover.*" (Verse 2) This short statement suggests that they used to swear an oath every time they feared exposure, or whenever one of their schemes was uncovered, or some of what they said about Muslims was reported. They hoped that such oaths would protect them from the consequences of their exposure. Thus they used their false faith as a shield to hide their reality and allow them a chance to go on with their plots and schemes against the Muslim community. Thus, "*they turn people away from the path of God.*" They kept themselves and others away from God's path, using their false oaths for that end. "*Evil indeed is what they do.*" (Verse 2) Could there be anything worse than lying to mislead and deceive others?

The *sūrah* explains the reasons behind their behaviour, making it clear that they knowingly reverted to disbelief after having accepted Islam: "*That is because they professed to believe, then they renounced faith. So, a seal has been set on their hearts and therefore they are devoid of understanding.*" (Verse 3) Thus, whilst they have known what it means to accept faith, they nonetheless chose to revert to disbelief. No heart that has a sound understanding or appreciation of things, or indeed has life, would experience life under faith and then choose to return to disbelief. How can anyone who understands, appreciates and experiences the concept of life that faith promotes, with its view of the universe, and also breathes the fresh air of faith and lets the light of faith shine over his world wish to revert to the miserable and suffocating darkness of unfaith? None will make such a choice except he who is filled with grudges that blind his sight and blunt his senses. Hence, such people are in the miserable condition the verse describes: "*So, a seal has been set on their hearts and therefore they are devoid of understanding.*" (Verse 3)

The *sūrah* draws a unique picture of such people inviting ridicule and describing them as aimless, leading a futile existence, and nursing grudges. It presents an image of them that serves as an object of ridicule:

> *When you see them, their outward appearance may please you; and when they speak, you listen to what they say. They are like propped-up timbers. They think that every shout is directed against them. They are the real enemy; so beware of them. May God destroy them! How perverse they are!* (Verse 4)

Thus, they are merely an outward appearance, not real human beings who respond and interact. They may look pleasant to the eye as long as they remain silent, but when they speak they show themselves to be devoid of sense and feeling. They are like timbers, but not just any kind of wood: they are propped up against a wall, unable to move. This stone-cold picture shows the reaction of their souls, that is if they have souls at all. This is then complemented with a state of constant apprehension, perpetual fear and uncertainty: "*They think that every shout is directed against them.*" (Verse 4) They know themselves to be hypocrites, covered by a thin veil of pretence, false oaths and attempts to appease. Hence, they live under the constant dread that their reality will be exposed. The *sūrah* shows them always turning around, dreading every move and every shout. They imagine that every cry is setting a chase after them. Thus, spiritually, they are like propped up pieces of wood, but when it is a question of fear for one's life or property, they look like a trembling reed in a storm. In both cases, they are the main enemy of the Prophet and the Muslim community: "*They are the real enemy; so beware of them.*" They are the enemy within, hiding within Muslim ranks. Hence, they represent a greater danger than the external enemy. Therefore, the Prophet is instructed to beware of them. He is not, however, instructed here to kill them. Instead, he was to pursue a different course of action, one that reflected much wisdom and confidence that their schemes would come to nothing.

"*May God destroy them! How perverse they are!*" (Verse 4) God will indeed be their enemy wherever they turn. Such a prayer by God

Almighty means a verdict that is certain to take place. It is their inevitable outcome, as history has clearly shown.

Stirring Up Trouble

The *sūrah* continues to describe their actions, revealing the rancour in their hearts. It shows how they schemed against the Prophet, yet were quick with their lies when exposed. These were their known qualities:

> *When they are told, 'Come, so that God's Messenger may ask forgiveness for you,' they turn their heads away. You see them drawing back in arrogance. As for them, it is all the same whether you pray for their forgiveness or you do not pray. God will not forgive them; for God does not bestow His guidance on such transgressor folk. They are the ones who say [to one another]: 'Do not give anything to those who are with God's Messenger, so that they may abandon him.' To God belong the treasures of the heavens and the earth, but the hypocrites cannot understand. They say, 'When we return to Madīnah, the more honourable will surely drive out those who are contemptible.' All honour belongs to God, His Messenger and the believers, but the hypocrites do not know.* (Verses 5–8)

Several early scholars confirm that these verses relate to an incident in which 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy featured prominently. Ibn Isḥāq gives a detailed account of it in his report on the expedition to forestall a planned attack by the al-Muṣṭalaq tribe:

> The Muslims were still encamping at the spring which provided the stage for their battle. Servants were taking horses to the water to drink. Among them was Jahjāh, 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb's servant. Apparently, there was some scrambling at the water among the servants. Jahjāh clashed with an 'ally' of the Khazraj, named Sinān ibn Wabr. Neither man seemed to be endowed with much wisdom: punches were exchanged and each appealed to his 'group' for help. Jahjāh called on the Muhājirīn to defend him, while Sinān called on the Anṣār. 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy felt very angry when he heard of

this. He was attended by a group of his people, including a young man called Zayd ibn Arqam. He said to them: "I have never known such humiliation as has befallen us today. They [the Muhājirīn] are now standing up to us in our own home town. They are ungrateful to us for our favours. Our case with the refugees of the Quraysh is an apt example of the proverb: 'Fatten your dog and he will eat you.' When we go back to Madīnah the honourable among the two of us will certainly chase the humble out of it. You have only yourselves to blame for all this. You have taken them into your own homes and given them your own money until they have become rich. I swear that if you stop helping them with what you have, they will leave you and go elsewhere."

Zayd ibn Arqam recounted all this to the Prophet who was attended by 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb. 'Umar suggested that the Prophet should command 'Abbād ibn Bishr to kill 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy. The Prophet said: "How would you like it, 'Umar, if people started to say that Muḥammad is killing his Companions? Indeed, I shall not do that. However, give orders to depart now." Thus, these orders were given at a time when the Prophet never used to depart.

'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy learnt that the Prophet had been told what he had said. He therefore hastened to him and denied any knowledge of what had been attributed to him. He swore by God that he did not say anything of the sort. Those of the Prophet's Companions who were present tried to pacify matters. They were still keen that 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy should be given his chance to accept Islam. After all, he had been well respected among his people before the advent of Islam. They suggested to the Prophet that Zayd ibn Arqam might have misquoted or misheard 'Abdullāh.

When the orders were given to march, Usayd ibn Ḥuḍayr, a prominent figure among the Anṣār, came to the Prophet, greeted him with the respect due to him as Messenger of God and said: "Prophet, I see that you are marching at a time of day when you used not to march." The Prophet said to him: "Have you not heard what your friend said?" When Usayd asked for details, the Prophet told him that 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy had said that "the

honourable among the two of us will chase the humble out of Madīnah." Usayd said: "Yes indeed, Messenger of God. You can turn him out of Madīnah if you like. You are the honourable and he is the humble." Usayd then pleaded clemency and told the Prophet: "God has sent you to us when his people were preparing to crown him king. He may think that you have robbed him of his kingdom."

The Prophet marched at the head of the Muslims for the rest of the day and throughout the night, and continued marching until mid-morning, when it was burning hot. He then allowed his Companions to stop. Hardly had they sat down when they all fell asleep. This the Prophet did in order that people would not be preoccupied with what 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy had said.

Shortly afterwards, the *sūrah* entitled *al-Munāfiqūn*, or The Hypocrites, was revealed. It describes the hypocrites and their feelings towards the Muslims and it also states the very words said by 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy and conveyed to the Prophet by Zayd ibn Arqam. There was no longer any doubt as to the accuracy of Zayd's report. The Prophet held Zayd's ear in his hand and said: "This is the one who made good use of his ear for the sake of God."

'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy had a son whose name was also 'Abdullāh. Unlike his father, 'Abdullāh was a good believer who entertained no doubt about the truthfulness of Muḥammad's message. Indeed, the Prophet was so certain of 'Abdullāh's strong faith that he appointed him to deputize for him in his absence when the Prophet headed the Muslim army on their final expedition to Badr. Moreover, 'Abdullāh was a dutiful son to his father. It was a cause of distress to him that his father acted against the Prophet. He would have done anything to bring his father within the Muslim fold. When he heard that his father uttered those wicked comments against the Prophet and the Muhājirīn he realized that this crime was a capital one. He also learnt that some of the Companions of the Prophet had counselled him to get rid of 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy. 'Abdullāh, the son, went to the Prophet and spoke to him: "Messenger of God, I have heard that you intend to kill 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy for what was reported to you as his words. If you must kill him,

then you have only to command me and I will bring you his head. The tribe of al-Khazraj [his own tribe] is fully aware that I am its most dutiful son to his father. However, I fear that if you order someone else to kill him, I may not be able to look at my father's killer walking in the street. I may be moved to kill him. If I do so, I would be killing a believer in revenge for an unbeliever. Hell would then be my doom." The Prophet smiled and calmed him down. He said to 'Abdullāh: "We will be kind to him and treat him well as long as he is with us."

'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy remained in Madīnah and he never lost an opportunity to speak ill of Islam and the Prophet. His credibility, however, was eroded. Whenever he said or did something, his own people were the first to take issue with him and remonstrate with him, trying to make him see his error. When this was apparent, the Prophet said to 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, the first to suggest that 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy should be killed: "Now do you see, 'Umar? Had I killed him when you suggested that to me, some people would have been very angry, while they themselves would be prepared to kill him now if I would only order them to do so." 'Umar replied: "I certainly know that God's Messenger knows better than I do and his actions are more blessed than mine."[1]

It is reported by 'Ikrimah, Ibn Zayd and others that when the people went back to Madīnah, 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy's son stood at the entrance to Madīnah with his sword in his hand. People passed by, then his father arrived. The son said to him: 'Stand back.' He said: 'What is the matter with you?' He said: 'By God! You shall not pass this point until God's Messenger gives you permission. He is the honourable and you are the humble.' When the Prophet arrived, for he used to walk at the rear of the army to look after anyone who may be in need of help, 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy complained to him about his son. The son said: 'By God, he will not enter until you, Messenger of God, so permit him.' The Prophet

1. For a fuller treatment of this event, see, Adil Salahi (2002), ***Muhammad: Man and Prophet***, Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, pp. 407–411. – Editor's note.

permitted him to go in, at which juncture the son said: 'Now that God's Messenger has given you permission, you may walk in.'

Dealing with Hypocrisy

When we consider the events and look at the people involved, as also the Qur'ānic comments, we see the divine method of cultivating the first Muslim community and we marvel at how God conducts matters and events.

Thus, we see the first Muslim community infiltrated by hypocrites who live within its ranks for almost ten years, during the Prophet's lifetime, and he does not expel them. In fact, God does not make them known to him by name or person until shortly before his own death. He would know such a one only by the tone of his speech, the way he twisted words and tried to hide things. He also knew them by their reactions to things and events. God had willed this so that people were not allowed to judge others' intentions and hearts. Judgement on these is for God alone. He alone knows what people harbour in their hearts and He alone requires people to account for them. As for us, we judge people by what we see before our eyes. Thus, no one is judged on the basis of suspicion. Even when God identified for His Messenger those who remained hypocrites until shortly before his death, the Prophet did not expel them from the Muslim community when they continued to put up a show that they were Muslims and fulfilled Islamic obligations. Instead, he kept such knowledge to himself, informing only one of his Companions, Ḥudhayfah ibn al-Yamān, of their identity. Neither of them publicized the information. Indeed, 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb wanted to be sure even of himself. Hence he went to Ḥudhayfah to ask him whether the Prophet had mentioned him as being among the hypocrites. Ḥudhayfah would only reply that he was not one of them, adding no further information. The Prophet was also ordered not to pray for any of them who might have died. His Companions would thus know by his absence from the *janāzah* prayer [i.e. the prayer for a dead person] that the deceased was among the hypocrites. After the Prophet's own death, Ḥudhayfah also refrained from attending the *janāzah* prayer of any hypocrite mentioned to him by the Prophet. 'Umar too would not

offer the *janāzah* prayer for a dead person until he had made sure that their faith had remained untainted. If he saw Ḥudhayfah attending the prayer, he too would offer it. If not, he would not offer it either, but also would say nothing about this.

Thus events moved, as God had willed, fulfilling their intended purposes. They served to provide lessons and to cultivate the minds, manners and morals of the Muslim community. Furthermore, the event which led to the revelation of these verses serves to point out a number of values.

We see first 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy: a man living among the Muslim community, close to the Prophet. Events take place in succession and signs of different sorts are seen, all confirming the truth of the Islamic faith and the message preached by the Prophet. Yet 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy's heart is not responsive to faith. Apparently, God has not granted him the blessing of accepting faith. Something stands between him and this great flow of light: it is the grudge he harbours for not being made king of the Aws and Khazraj. He had been all but proclaimed king when the people of Madīnah began to accept Islam, following the Prophet's arrival there. This was enough for him to turn away from Islam and its divine guidance, regardless of how it was confirmed by evidence and signs aplenty. Indeed, he lived in the midst of the Muslim community, witnessing the radical change Islam brings into people's lives.

We also see his son, also named 'Abdullāh, a superior example of a dedicated Muslim. He is so miserable because of his father's attitude and so ashamed of him. Yet, he feels for him the love a dutiful son has for his father. He hears that God's Messenger wants his father dead, and he experiences greatly different emotions. He faces these with all frankness and seriousness. He is committed to Islam, loves God's Messenger and is keen to fulfil his orders, even when these are against his own father. Yet he cannot condone the thought that anyone should kill his father or that such a person would walk freely after having done that. He fears that he might weaken and that he will not overcome the desire to take revenge. Therefore, he goes to his leader, the Prophet, requesting his help in how best to deal with the conflicting emotions that so troubled him. He requests that if the Prophet wants his father killed, then he should

let him be the one to carry this out. He would so obey the Prophet and do as he was told. Otherwise, if someone else killed his father, he might kill that person in revenge, thus taking the life of a believer in revenge for an unbeliever. He would then face tremendous difficulties in the life to come.

What we see here is truly awesome. It is the greatness of faith deeply enshrined in a believer's heart. The man offers the Prophet the opportunity to assign to him one of the hardest ever actions a human being can face: to kill his own father. He is sincere in his offer, and his purpose is to avoid something that has worse and graver consequences: to kill a believer in revenge for an unbeliever, thus incurring a sin that could land him in hell. We are amazed at his absolute sincerity and by the way in which he faces his human weakness towards his father. He says to the Prophet: "By God, all my tribe, the Khazraj, are fully aware that they have no son who is more dutiful towards his father than I am." He does not want the Prophet to change any orders he gives concerning his father. He knows that whatever the Prophet orders must be obeyed. All he wants is that he should be the one to carry out those orders, so as not to succumb to human weakness later on.

Impressed by such feelings of a man with profound faith, the Prophet kindly and compassionately removes all difficulty from him, saying that as far as his father is concerned: "We will be kind to him and treat him well as long as he is with us." Prior to this, the Prophet had also stopped 'Umar who had advocated that 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy be killed by one of his tribesmen, saying: "How would you like it, 'Umar, if people started to say that Muḥammad is killing his Companions?"

We also note with admiration how the Prophet reacted as a wise, inspired leader to quell the event. He ordered the Muslims' immediate departure, and continued marching with his army to the point of fatigue. His aim was to distract people from any thought of blind tribal loyalty, which the cries of the two fighting men might have stirred. He wanted to quell the sort of strife instigated by the hypocrite 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy who aimed to destroy the feelings of love and brotherhood that existed between the Muhājirīn and the Anṣār. These feelings were of a unique type, previously unknown in human history. We similarly note the Prophet's remarks to Usayd ibn Ḥuḍayr, which sought to mobilize

his Companions spiritually against discord and strife. He wanted the man who aimed to sow discord to be stopped by his own people as he still enjoyed a high position among them.

Finally, the last scene is amazing: 'Abdullāh ibn 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy, a firm believer, holds his sword at the entrance gate to Madīnah to prevent his father's entry. He wanted his father's own words to come true. It was he who said: "When we return to Madīnah, the more honourable will surely drive out those who are contemptible." He wanted him to know that God's Messenger was the more honourable and that he himself was the contemptible one. He forced him to stand there until the Prophet arrived and gave him permission to enter, showing him in practical measures to whom true honour belonged.

It is to such a high summit that those people attained through faith. Yet they remained ordinary humans, experiencing all human feelings and frailties. This is the most beautiful characteristic of this faith when people understand it as it should be understood. They then become its practical image, in the form of humans who eat food and walk the streets.

Arrogance and Deprivation

We will now discuss the Qur'ānic verses that refer to those events: "*When they are told, 'Come, so that God's Messenger may ask forgiveness for you,' they turn their heads away. You see them drawing back in arrogance.*" (Verse 5) They perform their actions, say whatever they may say, and then if they realize that the Prophet heard of their behaviour they resort to cowardly ways. They swear an oath in an attempt to protect themselves. If, when feeling secure that they do not have to face the Prophet, someone says to them, '*Come, so that God's Messenger may ask forgiveness for you,*' they turn away in arrogance. Both characteristics of cowardice and arrogance go hand in hand among hypocrites. However, such behaviour normally belongs to those who hold position and influence among people, yet feel themselves too weak for direct confrontation. They resort to arrogant behaviour as long as they do not have to confront the truth. Yet when they are confronted with it, cowardice and false oaths are their mark.

Therefore, the *sūrah* addresses the Prophet, telling him what God has determined in the hypocrites' case, and since God's judgement has been passed, there is no longer any use in praying for their forgiveness: "*As for them, it is all the same whether you pray for their forgiveness or you do not pray. God will not forgive them; for God does not bestow His guidance on such transgressor folk.*" (Verse 6)

The *sūrah* goes on to relate some aspects of their transgression that were the cause of God's judgement: "*They are the ones who say [to one another]: 'Do not give anything to those who are with God's Messenger, so that they may abandon him'.*" What they say betrays their wickedness and spitefulness. Their plan to starve the Prophet's Companions is the same strategy employed by all opponents of truth and faith in all generations and communities. In their perverted view, they think that all people are like them in giving paramount importance to food and survival. This was the plan the Quraysh followed when they imposed a total boycott on the Hāshimite clan, to which the Prophet belonged, so that they would abandon him and hand him over to them. As we are told in this verse, it was also the plan upheld by the hypocrites. They hoped that it would ensure that, once hunger had bitten hard among the believers, they would abandon the Prophet. The communists did the same when they denied the religious among their people the right to their rations. They wanted them to starve to death, or at least until they abandoned their faith in God and stopped praying. Today, the same plan is adopted by other forces hostile to Islamic revival in the Muslim world. They place believers under siege, starving them and closing down all avenues of earning a living.[2]

Thus, we see the opponents of faith, old and new, resorting to this obnoxious and dreadful method, forgetting the simple truth of which the Qur'ān reminds them in the same verse: "*To God belong the treasures of the heavens and the earth, but the hypocrites cannot understand.*" (Verse 7) It is indeed from these treasures of the heavens and the earth, which all

2. More recent examples may be given to confirm what the author says. The latest of these is seen in the boycott imposed by Israel and its allies on the Palestinians, causing extreme hardship and starvation so as to force them to abandon their right to their land and homes. – Editor's note.

belong to God Almighty, that these enemies of the truth receive their livelihoods; yet they try to control the means of such livelihood available to believers. Yet they cannot even create their own sustenance. How stupid and dull-minded they are when they think they can stop others from receiving their sustenance!

God thus reassures the believers and strengthens their resolve to face up to such vile and odious plans. He tells them that God's treasures in the heavens and the earth are open to all. He who gives out of these treasures to His enemies will never forget the ones who believe in Him. In His grace, He does not impose mass starvation even on His enemies. He knows that if He were to deny them their provisions they would have nothing. Yet He is too merciful to abandon His servants, even the ones hostile to Him, to what is beyond their means of control. Mass starvation is a method adopted only by the most vile, obnoxious and wicked of people.

The *sūrah* also quotes the hypocrites' other words: "*They say, 'When we return to Madīnah, the more honourable will surely drive out those who are contemptible.*" (Verse 8) We have seen how 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy's words were made to come true at the hands of his own son, ensuring that the contemptible one could only enter Madīnah by the permission of the most honourable one. "*All honour belongs to God, His Messenger and the believers, but the hypocrites do not know.*" (Verse 8) God includes with Himself His Messenger and the believers, bestowing His own honour on them. This is a gesture of honouring that only God can bestow. What is more honourable than God's hand placing the Prophet and the believers next to Himself and saying: 'Here We are, standing under the banner of honour, and this is the rank of the honourable.'

God certainly tells the truth as He intertwines honour with faith in a believer's heart. Such is the honour that derives from God's own honour. It never shrinks, gives way or abandons a believer, not even in the most difficult of times, unless his faith weakens. When faith is solidly established in a person's heart, honour and dignity remain solid within him. "*But the hypocrites do not know.*" (Verse 8) How are they to know when they do not appreciate this sort of honour and dignity and are cut off from their eternal source?

Time to Be Charitable

The last address in the *sūrah* is made to the believers whom God placed, together with His Messenger, in His own rank, making them share in His honour and dignity. He wants them to climb to this high summit, ridding themselves of any characteristic that is akin to those of the hypocrites. They should prefer such superior elevation to everything else, including their property and offspring. Nothing must be allowed to divert their attention from aspiring to such lofty heights:

> *Believers! Do not let your riches or your children make you oblivious of the remembrance of God. Those who do so will surely be the losers. Give, then, out of what We have provided for you, before death comes to any of you, and then he says, 'My Lord, if You would grant me a delay for a short while, I would give in charity and be one of the righteous.' God does not grant a delay to any soul when its term has come. God is fully aware of all that you do.* (Verses 9–11)

Money and children can preoccupy a person making him oblivious to everything else, that is, unless his heart alerts him to the aim of his existence, making him feel that he has a superior goal. This goal must be one that is worthy of the creature in whom God has blown of His own spirit, giving him the aspiration to achieve a few divine characteristics, albeit within his own human limitations. God has given him riches and offspring so as to fulfil his task of building human life on earth, but not so that he is so fully preoccupied with them that they distract him from remembering God and from being in contact with the source of his humanity. Those that are so distracted "*will surely be the losers.*" (Verse 9) The first thing they lose is their human identity, which is dependent on maintaining the bond with the source of man's humanity. Whoever loses himself has lost everything, regardless of the size of his wealth and the number of his offspring.

With respect to charitable donations, the *sūrah* here touches their hearts in several ways: "*Give, then, out of what We have provided for you.*" (Verse 10) This reminds us of the source of all that we have. It is all from God in whom we believe and who instructs us to be generous

and charitable. Such giving should be done "*before death comes to any of you...*" It should be a result of the person's own action before death overtakes him and he leaves everything behind for others to enjoy. If he does not do so then he will look around only to discover that he has put nothing forward for his own salvation. This is the worst stupidity and the greatest loss.

He will then feel pangs of regret and wish he could have more time to be charitable and join with those people who are righteous. Such wishes benefit him nothing, for "*God does not grant a delay to any soul when its term has come.*" (Verse 11) How can he now put forward anything when the chance is gone? "*God is fully aware of all that you do.*" (Verse 11) Several touches within a short space are thus made at the right place, immediately after depicting the hypocrites' characteristics and their scheming against the believers. When the believers stand firm in God's own rank, they will be protected against the hypocrites. It serves them well, then, to fulfil the duties that their faith requires of them. They must never abandon their remembrance of God, as this is the source of their ultimate safety. Thus does God use the Qur'ān to educate and cultivate believers' minds and hearts.

SŪRAH 64

Al-Taghābun

(Mutual Loss and Gain)

Prologue

In subject matter, images and import, this *sūrah* is very similar to those revealed in Makkah, particularly in its opening section. Indeed, the overall atmosphere that characterizes the *sūrahs* revealed in Madīnah begins to appear only in its concluding section.

The verses from the beginning up to the direct address to the believers in verse 14 aim to establish the foundations of faith and to instil the Islamic concept. Employing the style of Makkan *sūrahs*, it addresses the unbelievers directly, presenting its theme to them. It uses the same universal and psychological effects and portrays images of the destruction of earlier communities that denied God's messages. It also presents images of the Day of Judgement, emphatically confirming resurrection. This indicates that the addressees denied it altogether.

The last verses, from 14 to 18, address the believers in a manner similar to that used in *sūrahs* revealed in Madīnah, urging them to spend their money in the service of God's cause, and warning them against failure in the test that their riches and children represent. Similar addresses can be found in many *sūrahs* of the Madīnah period, and this because of the problems faced by the fledgling Muslim community there. This address also includes a comforting aspect to help the Muslims bear with patience any reversals, calamities or burdens; all these are attributed to

God's will. This is the concept these *sūrahs* seek to confirm, particularly after the command given to the Muslim community to fight for God's cause and what this involves of sacrifice.

Several reports suggest that this *sūrah* was revealed in Makkah, but other reports, given more weight, state that it was in fact a Madīnan revelation. I almost leaned to the view that it was Makkan, because of the style of its earlier sections and its general ambience. Eventually, however, I decided to stick to the more preponderant view that its revelation was Madīnan. There is nothing to preclude those earlier sections from addressing the unbelievers after the Prophet's migration to Madīnah, whether those unbelievers were the people of Makkah or others living closer to Madīnah. Likewise, there is nothing to exclude the possibility that Madīnan *sūrahs* should at times clarify the fundamentals of faith and the Islamic concept of life, using the same style that we find in what was revealed in Makkah.

Al-Taghābūn
(Mutual Loss and Gain)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

All that is in the heavens and all that is on earth extol the limitless glory of God; all sovereignty belongs to Him and all praise is due to Him. He has power over all things. (1)

It is He who has created you, yet some of you are unbelievers and some do believe. God sees all that you do. (2)

He has created the heavens and the earth in accordance with the truth, and fashioned you, giving you a comely appearance. To Him all shall return. (3)

He knows what is in the heavens and the earth; and He knows what you conceal and what you reveal. God has full knowledge of the secrets of all hearts. (4)

Have you not heard of those who disbelieved in earlier times? They tasted the evil consequences of their own doings. Painful suffering still awaits them. (5)

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

يُسَبِّحُ لِلَّهِ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ ۖ لَهُ الْمُلْكُ وَلَهُ الْحَمْدُ ۖ وَهُوَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ﴿١﴾

هُوَ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ فَمِنكُمْ كَافِرٌ وَمِنكُم مُّؤْمِنٌ ۚ وَاللَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ بَصِيرٌ ﴿٢﴾

خَلَقَ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ بِالْحَقِّ وَصَوَّرَكُمْ فَأَحْسَنَ صُوَرَكُمْ ۖ وَإِلَيْهِ الْمَصِيرُ ﴿٣﴾

يَعْلَمُ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَيَعْلَمُ مَا تُسِرُّونَ وَمَا تُعْلِنُونَ ۚ وَاللَّهُ عَلِيمٌ بِذَاتِ الصُّدُورِ ﴿٤﴾

أَلَمْ يَأْتِكُمْ نَبَأُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا مِن قَبْلُ فَذَاقُوا وَبَالَ أَمْرِهِمْ وَلَهُمْ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ﴿٥﴾

That is because their messengers came to them with clear signs, but they said, 'Shall mere mortals be our guides?' So, they denied the truth and turned away. God is free of all need. God is self-sufficient, worthy of all praise. (6)

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُۥ كَانَت تَّأْتِيهِمْ رُسُلُهُم بِٱلْبَيِّنَٰتِ
فَقَالُوٓا۟ أَبَشَرٌ يَهْدُونَنَا فَكَفَرُوا۟ وَتَوَلَّوا۟ۚ
وَّٱسْتَغْنَى ٱللَّهُۚ وَٱللَّهُ غَنِىٌّ حَمِيدٌ ٦

The unbelievers allege that they will not be raised from the dead. Say, 'Yes indeed! By my Lord, you will certainly be raised from the dead, and then you will certainly be told of all that you have done. This is easy for God.' (7)

زَعَمَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوٓا۟ أَن لَّن يُبْعَثُوا۟ۚ قُلْ بَلَىٰ وَرَبِّى
لَتُبْعَثُنَّ ثُمَّ لَتُنَبَّؤُنَّ بِمَا عَمِلْتُمْۚ وَذَٰلِكَ عَلَى
ٱللَّهِ يَسِيرٌ ٧

Believe then in God and His Messenger, and in the light which We have bestowed from on high. God is fully aware of what you do. (8)

فَـَٔامِنُوا۟ بِٱللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِۦ وَٱلنُّورِ ٱلَّذِىٓ أَنزَلْنَاۚ
وَٱللَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ خَبِيرٌ ٨

[Think of] the time when He will gather you all together for the Day of the Gathering, the day of mutual loss and gain. For anyone who shall have believed in God and done what is right, He will efface his bad deeds and will admit him into gardens through which running waters flow, where they will abide for ever. That is the supreme triumph. (9)

يَوْمَ يَجْمَعُكُمْ لِيَوْمِ ٱلْجَمْعِۖ ذَٰلِكَ يَوْمُ ٱلتَّغَابُنِۗ
وَمَن يُؤْمِنۢ بِٱللَّهِ وَيَعْمَلْ صَٰلِحًا يُكَفِّرْ عَنْهُ
سَيِّـَٔاتِهِۦ وَيُدْخِلْهُ جَنَّٰتٍ تَجْرِى مِن تَحْتِهَا
ٱلْأَنْهَٰرُ خَٰلِدِينَ فِيهَآ أَبَدًاۚ ذَٰلِكَ
ٱلْفَوْزُ ٱلْعَظِيمُ ٩

But those who disbelieve and deny Our revelations are destined for the fire where they will abide. How miserable an end! (10)

وَٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ وَكَذَّبُوا۟ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَآ أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ أَصْحَٰبُ ٱلنَّارِ خَٰلِدِينَ فِيهَا ۖ وَبِئْسَ ٱلْمَصِيرُ ﴿١٠﴾

No calamity can ever befall anyone except by God's leave. He will guide the heart of anyone who believes in Him. God has full knowledge of all things. (11)

مَآ أَصَابَ مِن مُّصِيبَةٍ إِلَّا بِإِذْنِ ٱللَّهِ ۗ وَمَن يُؤْمِنۢ بِٱللَّهِ يَهْدِ قَلْبَهُۥ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ بِكُلِّ شَىْءٍ عَلِيمٌ ﴿١١﴾

So obey God, and obey the Messenger. If you turn away, know that Our Messenger's only duty is to deliver his message in full clarity. (12)

وَأَطِيعُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُوا۟ ٱلرَّسُولَ ۚ فَإِن تَوَلَّيْتُمْ فَإِنَّمَا عَلَىٰ رَسُولِنَا ٱلْبَلَٰغُ ٱلْمُبِينُ ﴿١٢﴾

God: there is no deity other than Him. In God, then, let the believers place their trust. (13)

ٱللَّهُ لَآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ ۚ وَعَلَى ٱللَّهِ فَلْيَتَوَكَّلِ ٱلْمُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿١٣﴾

Believers, some of your spouses and children are enemies to you; so beware of them. Yet if you overlook their faults, pardon and forgive, God is Much-Forgiving, Ever Merciful. (14)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓا۟ إِنَّ مِنْ أَزْوَٰجِكُمْ وَأَوْلَٰدِكُمْ عَدُوًّا لَّكُمْ فَٱحْذَرُوهُمْ ۚ وَإِن تَعْفُوا۟ وَتَصْفَحُوا۟ وَتَغْفِرُوا۟ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿١٤﴾

Your wealth and children are only a trial and a temptation, whereas with God there is a great reward. (15)

إِنَّمَآ أَمْوَٰلُكُمْ وَأَوْلَٰدُكُمْ فِتْنَةٌ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ عِندَهُۥٓ أَجْرٌ عَظِيمٌ ﴿١٥﴾

Therefore, remain God-fearing as best as you can, listen, obey and be charitable. That will be best for you. Those that are preserved from their own meanness are the ones who will achieve success. (16)

فَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ مَا اسْتَطَعْتُمْ وَاسْمَعُوا
وَأَطِيعُوا وَأَنفِقُوا خَيْرًا لِّأَنفُسِكُمْ
وَمَن يُوقَ شُحَّ نَفْسِهِ فَأُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ
الْمُفْلِحُونَ ﴿١٦﴾

If you make a goodly loan to God, He will repay you in multiples, and will forgive you your sins. God is ever thankful, forbearing. (17)

إِن تُقْرِضُوا اللَّهَ قَرْضًا حَسَنًا
يُضَاعِفْهُ لَكُمْ وَيَغْفِرْ لَكُمْ
وَاللَّهُ شَكُورٌ حَلِيمٌ ﴿١٧﴾

He knows all that is beyond the reach of human perception and all that is witnessed; the Almighty, the Wise. (18)

عَالِمُ الْغَيْبِ وَالشَّهَادَةِ الْعَزِيزُ
الْحَكِيمُ ﴿١٨﴾

The Creator and His Creation

The first section of the *sūrah* aims to establish the proper concept of the universe based on faith, present the true bond between the Creator and the universe He has created, and mention some of God's names and attributes as well as their effect on the universe and on human life:

> *All that is in the heavens and all that is on earth extol the limitless glory of God; all sovereignty belongs to Him and all praise is due to Him. He has power over all things. It is He who has created you, yet some of you are unbelievers and some do believe. God sees all that you do. He has created the heavens and the earth in accordance with the truth, and fashioned you, giving you a comely appearance. To Him all shall return. He knows what is in the heavens and the earth; and He knows what you conceal and what you reveal. God has full knowledge of the secrets of all hearts.* (Verses 1–4)

This concept is one hundred per cent accurate: it depicts what believers have always known and followed. All divine messages have preached the concept of God's oneness and His creation of everything in the universe. They all make it clear that God takes care of everyone and everything in the universe. We have no doubt about this, since the Qur'ān confirms the same about all God's messengers and the messages they advocated. Hence, we pay little attention to what we find today in distorted scriptures or to what is written on comparative religion by people who do not believe in the Qur'ān, in whole or in part. Deviation from the true divine faith is the result of what has been introduced by some followers of these messages, giving the appearance that they did not preach the pure concept of God's oneness, or that God is not in full control and direct contact with every creature. All this is deviation and does not belong to the original form of any divine religion, which remains the same from the first to the last of God's messages. It is impossible that God should have sent down a religion that is in conflict with these essential principles, as alleged by scriptures that have been distorted.

This pure concept allows the human mind to understand, as best as it can, the true nature of Godhead, feel the power of the Almighty, and recognize it in everything we see in the universe. We can thus see the work of this supreme power within ourselves, live within its scope, and appreciate its effects that cannot be removed from our senses or our minds. We see it encompassing everything, conducting all affairs, controlling all events, taking care of all. Nothing escapes it, small or large, trivial or important. This means that the human heart will always be highly sensitive, truly alert, entertaining feelings of apprehension and expectation, fear and hope. Thus man goes about life, looking up to God with every move and every action, feeling His power and realizing that He sees all, watches all and controls all. Yet He is also ever merciful to all and bestows His grace on everyone and in all situations.

Moreover, this concept enables us to feel that the entire universe turns to its Lord. So, we turn with the universe and join it in extolling God's limitless glory. We realize that the whole universe is controlled by God's will, subject to His wisdom, and so we submit to His law. This is why we describe it as a universal concept of faith. Its universality is

emphasized in a variety of ways throughout the Qur'ān. A clear example can be found in the concluding verses of *Sūrah* 59, The Gathering, discussed in Volume XVI.

God's Limitless Power

"*All that is in the heavens and all that is on earth extol the limitless glory of God; all sovereignty belongs to Him and all praise is due to Him.*" (Verse 1) Everything in the heavens and the earth turns towards their Lord, extolling His limitless glory and praising Him. The heart of this universe is a believing heart, and the soul of everything that exists is a believer. God owns all, and they all know this truth. God is praised in Himself, glorified by all His creation. When man alone stands in the midst of this great universe rebelling against the truth, cold-hearted, spiritless, turning away from his Lord and Master, refusing to glorify Him, he is at odds with all, discarded by all.

"*He has power over all things.*" (Verse 1) His is absolute, limitless and unrestricted power. The Qur'ān impresses this truth on every believer's heart. As the believer recognizes its significance, he knows that placing his trust in God alone means that he relies on the power that can do and achieve everything, without limit or restriction. This understanding of God's power and His glorification and praise by all that exists is part of the universal concept of faith Islam formulates.

The second point penetrates deep into the human heart. It is man alone who stands in the midst of the universe in two states of belief and unbelief, while all the universe believes in its Creator, and extols His limitless glory and praise: "*It is He who has created you, yet some of you are unbelievers and some do believe.*" (Verse 2) It is by God's will and through His power that man was originated. He gave him the ability to turn to or away from faith. Thus man is distinguished among God's creation by this dual ability. Hence, he is assigned the great trust and momentous responsibility of faith. Therefore, God has honoured this creature by giving him the ability to distinguish truth from falsehood; furthermore, the choice is up to him. He has also given him the standard by which he can evaluate his own actions and determine his way. This standard is the religion God revealed to human messengers. In this way,

God has helped man to shoulder the trust assigned to him, depriving him of nothing that he needs. "*God sees all that you do.*" (Verse 2) He watches man's actions, knows his true intentions and the direction he takes. Let man, then, go about life alert to the fact that he is watched by the One who sees all. This concept of man's nature is part of the clear and straightforward Islamic concept of man's position in the universe, as well as his abilities and responsibilities towards the Creator of the universe.

The third point emphasizes the truth that is inherent in the nature of the universe and which ensures the proper functioning of the heavens and the earth. It also highlights the fine beauty of God's creation as seen in the creation of man himself. It also makes it clear that all creatures will ultimately return to Him: "*He has created the heavens and the earth in accordance with the truth, and fashioned you, giving you a comely appearance. To Him all shall return.*" (Verse 3)

The first sentence in this verse, "*He has created the heavens and the earth in accordance with the truth,*" implants in a believer's mind that the truth is firmly established in the very foundation of this universe. It is neither transitory nor incidental. The very structure of the universe is founded on this basis. This is stated by none other than God who created the heavens and the earth and knows what foundation He has given them. When this fact is firmly settled in our consciousness, it gives us total reassurance about the basis of our faith: it is the same truth that serves as the foundation of the universe. This means that this faith must inevitably triumph, and must remain pure and well established. Whatever else is false and will certainly be swept away.

Another fact is stated in the same verse, "*and [He] fashioned you, giving you a comely appearance.*" This gives man the feeling that he has special privilege with God who has bestowed on him the blessing of a comely appearance, both physically and spiritually. Man is the most perfected creature on earth in respect of his physical constitution and his spiritual qualities, which also entails marvellous secrets. Hence, he has been placed in charge of the earth, which is a vast area by human standards. A careful glance at man's general physical constitution, or at any of his physical systems, is sufficient to portray this fact most clearly: God "*fashioned you, giving you a comely appearance.*" It is an

appearance that combines beauty and perfection. The beauty varies between one physical form and another, but the design itself is so beautiful and so well executed, that it enables all functions and qualities that distinguish man above all other living creatures to work together perfectly.

"*To Him all shall return.*" Every thing, situation and creature will return to Him. The ultimate destiny of the universe and with it the ultimate destiny of man is with Him. It is from His will that they originated and to Him they will return. He is the First and the Last who holds every thing from its both ends, the beginning and the end. He, in His limitless glory, is not restricted by anything.

The fourth point in the opening section of the *sūrah* describes God's perfect knowledge that includes all and every thing. He is fully aware of what man declares and what he conceals, and knows what is even more deeply hidden than the deepest and closest of secrets. He knows what people entertain deep in their hearts: "*He knows what is in the heavens and the earth; and He knows what you conceal and what you reveal. God has full knowledge of the secrets of all hearts.*" (Verse 4) When this fact is firmly established in man's mind it gives him a better knowledge of his Lord, contributing to his concept of the universe. It influences his feelings. He leads his life fully aware that God knows all there is to know about him, including his most secret thoughts and unexpressed feelings.

The three verses that follow the first are enough to enable man to live with the full awareness of the truth of his existence and that of the universe around him. He will also be aware of the bond he has with his Lord, how he should behave towards Him and how to fear Him in every situation in which he finds himself.

The Unbelievers' Objections

The second section reminds us of the fate of earlier communities that denied God's messages and the signs He gave them. They objected to the fact that God assigned His messages to human messengers, in the same way as the idolaters in Makkah objected to the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) and denied all the clear proof he put before them:

Have you not heard of those who disbelieved in earlier times? They tasted the evil consequences of their own doings. Painful suffering still awaits them. That is because their messengers came to them with clear signs, but they said, 'Shall mere mortals be our guides?' So, they denied the truth and turned away. God is free of all need. God is self-sufficient, worthy of all praise. (Verses 5–6)

The addressees here are, most probably, the unbelievers. They are reminded of the fates suffered by earlier communities who denied the truth, and warned against a similar fate. The interrogative form is adopted either as a denunciation of their stubbornness after they have been given such information or it is used to draw their attention to this same history that relates to them. They were fully aware of what happened to some of these communities, such as the 'Ād, Thamūd and the towns of Sodom and Gomorrah. In fact, they passed by them in their trips to the north and south of Arabia.

The Qur'ān mentions their fate in this life and states what awaits them in the life to come: "*Painful suffering still awaits them.*" (Verse 5) It then explains why they deserved what happened to them and what they are still to face: "*That is because their messengers came to them with clear signs, but they said, 'Shall mere mortals be our guides?'*" (Verse 6) It is the same objection voiced by the Makkan idolaters to the Prophet. It is an arrogant objection that betrays a total ignorance of the nature of the divine message and its being a code to be implemented in human life. Hence, it must be practically represented in a human being, in the Messenger who lives according to it and presents a model of its implementation. Thus, others will then be able to mould their own lives in the same way, and to the best of their abilities. Were the Messenger to belong to any other than the human race, people would not have had a practical example against which to mould their feelings and lives. Moreover, this objection betrays ignorance of the true nature of man and his elevated status, which enables him to receive and deliver a divine message instead of God assigning it to an angel, as the unbelievers frequently suggested. Man carries the spirit of God breathed into him when God first created Adam. This prepares him to receive God's message and to deliver it complete as he receives it from

on high. This is an honour bestowed on the human race, rejected only by those who are ignorant of the high status God gives to man when, within his own personal world, he gives full effect to this breath of God's spirit in him. Furthermore, the objection reflects the arrogance and false pride of those who refuse to follow a human messenger, as if such following would detract from the status of those ignorant, arrogant unbelievers. To them, it is acceptable to follow a messenger who belongs to a different kind of creature, but to follow one from their own ranks is too unbecoming.

Therefore, they disbelieved in God's messengers and turned away from them, rejecting the clear proofs and signs that they brought them. Their pride, combined with their ignorance of human nature, stood as a barrier preventing them from accepting the truth. Thus, they chose to turn away from God's guidance and to disbelieve in Him. "*So, they denied the truth and turned away.*" (Verse 6)

"*God is free of all need. God is self-sufficient, worthy of all praise.*" (Verse 6) He does not need that they should accept His guidance, nor does He need their worship. Indeed, He needs nothing from them or from anyone else. He is free of all need.

Such is the story of those who in earlier times denied God's messages and were made to taste the fruits of their unbelief. It also explains the reasons behind what happened to them and what awaits them in the life to come. How can present generations follow in their footsteps and deny the truth now? How can they risk a similar fate?

The Truth of Resurrection

The third section carries the theme of the previous one further, stating the situation of those unbelievers who deny the resurrection. It is clearly apparent that these were the idolaters whom the Prophet addressed, calling on them to believe in his message. This section instructs the Prophet to confirm, most emphatically, to them that the resurrection will certainly take place. Indeed, it adds a scene from the Day of Judgement that depicts the fates of the two groups who either deny or accept it. It calls on them to believe, obey and attribute everything that happens in the world to God Almighty:

The unbelievers allege that they will not be raised from the dead. Say, 'Yes indeed! By my Lord, you will certainly be raised from the dead, and then you will certainly be told of all that you have done. This is easy for God.' Believe then in God and His Messenger, and in the light which We have bestowed from on high. God is fully aware of what you do. [Think of] the time when He will gather you all together for the Day of the Gathering, the day of mutual loss and gain. For anyone who shall have believed in God and done what is right, He will efface his bad deeds and will admit him into gardens through which running waters flow, where they will abide for ever. That is the supreme triumph. But those who disbelieve and deny Our revelations are destined for the fire where they will abide. How miserable an end! No calamity can ever befall anyone except by God's leave. He will guide the heart of anyone who believes in Him. God has full knowledge of all things. So obey God, and obey the Messenger. If you turn away, know that Our Messenger's only duty is to deliver his message in full clarity. God: there is no deity other than Him. In God, then, let the believers place their trust. (Verses 7–13)

Right from the start the *sūrah* describes the unbelievers' argument as an 'allegation', thereby branding it as a lie. It follows this with a directive to the Prophet to assert his message of resurrection most emphatically, swearing by his Lord to its truth. Nothing can be more emphatic than an oath the Prophet makes by his Lord. "*Say: Yes indeed! By my Lord, you will certainly be raised from the dead, and then you will certainly be told of all that you have done.*" (Verse 7) Nothing of it will suffer neglect. God knows their deeds better than they do, so He will tell them all about it on the Day of Resurrection. "*This is easy for God.*" He knows all that is in the heavens and the earth, open and secret, as well as what is in people's hearts, expressed or otherwise. He also has power over all things, as stated earlier in the *sūrah*.

The *sūrah* then calls on them to believe in God and His Messenger, and in the light He has given His Messenger, which is the Qur'ān and the faith embodied in the Qur'ān. It is indeed light, since it comes from God, and "*God is the light of the heavens and the earth.*" (24: 35) The Qur'ān enlightens the heart to make it shine, able to see the truth

inherent within it: "*Believe then in God and His Messenger, and in the light which We have bestowed from on high.*" (Verse 8) This call on them to believe is followed by a comment that makes them realize that their situation is fully observed by God: "*God is fully aware of what you do.*" (Verse 8)

The next verse continues to draw the scene of the Day of Resurrection: "*[Think of] the time when He will gather you all together for the Day of the Gathering, the day of mutual loss and gain.*" (Verse 9) It is called the Day of the Gathering because all creatures from all generations are gathered together on that day, which is also attended by the angels. Only God knows the numbers of the angels, but we may have a sense of it when we reflect on the following *ḥadīth* in which Abū Dharr quotes the Prophet as saying: "I see and hear what you do not. The heavens is noisily bustling, and rightly so: there is not a four-finger width in it but occupied by an angel with his forehead placed low in prostration before God. Were you to know what I know, you would have laughed but a little and wept much, and you would not have enjoyed being in bed with women. You would have gone up the hills and mountains earnestly appealing to God. I wish I were a tree to be felled." [Related by al-Tirmidhī.] The heaven in which there is an angel in every little space of four fingers is this great expanse for which we know no limit, and in which a sun like ours appears to be no more than a fine particle floating in the air. Does this then give us an approximation for the number of angels in it? Furthermore, all these angels will form part of the assembled mass of creatures on the Day of Gathering.

It will be in front of this great assembly that the loss and gain will take place: the believers will take all happiness purely for themselves while the unbelievers will be totally deprived of it before being sent to hell. These are two greatly different lots. The sense we receive is that of a competition where the winners take all. Hence, each side wants to deprive its competitors. The believers end up winners and the unbelievers losers. This is what is meant by 'mutual loss and gain', as explained in the same verse and that which follows: "*For anyone who shall have believed in God and done what is right, He will efface his bad deeds and will admit him into gardens through which running waters flow, where they will abide for ever. That is the supreme triumph. But those who disbelieve*

and deny Our revelations are destined for the fire where they will abide. How miserable an end!" (Verses 9–10)

Before completing the call to them to believe, the *sūrah* states one of the main elements of the Islamic faith, which is to believe in God's will and the effect of belief in God on the human heart: "*No calamity can ever befall anyone except by God's leave. He will guide the heart of anyone who believes in Him. God has full knowledge of all things.*" (Verse 11)

Perhaps this fact is stated here only to put it clearly within the context of the faith they are called upon to adopt. It is a belief that attributes everything to God, and whatever good or evil takes place occurs only by God's will. This is an essential fact without which faith is incomplete. It is indeed the basis of all feelings a believer may have when facing life events and situations, good and happy or bad and miserable. On the other hand, this fact is stated here in response to something that took place and was clear in people's minds at the time of the revelation of this *sūrah* or this verse. Regardless of the exact situation, this fact represents an important aspect of the concept Islam implants in a believer's consciousness. He thus feels God's hand behind every event and every move. He receives with a calm heart whatever happens to him, whether it brings him happiness or adversity. He expresses his gratitude in the first case and demonstrates patience in the second. Alternatively, he may rise to a higher level, expressing his thanks to God in both cases of happiness and adversity, feeling that both bring him God's blessings. He then sees adversity as a reminder for him or an occasion that may bring him forgiveness of past sins or an increase in his reward. In an authentic *ḥadīth*, the Prophet is quoted as saying: "Amazing is the believer's situation: whatever God determines is good for him. Should he meet with adversity, he resorts to patience and this is good for him, while if he meets with what is pleasant, he expresses his gratitude to God, and this is good for him. This situation applies to no one other than a believer." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.]

"*He will guide the heart of anyone who believes in Him.*" (Verse 11) Some commentators explain this as meaning belief in God's will and being resigned to it in the event of facing a calamity. Ibn 'Abbās, however, takes this statement as indicating complete guidance granted to believing hearts, making them recognize the absolute truth. Thus

they attribute all things and all events to God, their source and goal. This provides them with reassurance and comfort. With such a complete and comprehensive vision, they are not encumbered by a partial view that may be deficient or erroneous. Hence, the comment at the end of the verse: "*God has full knowledge of all things.*" (Verse 11) It is, then, guidance to a share of God's knowledge. God grants this guidance to a person who truly believes, thus earning the prize of knowing something of what lies beyond this limited human life.

The *sūrah* continues with its call on people to believe, calling them now to obey God and His Messenger: "*So obey God, and obey the Messenger. If you turn away, know that Our Messenger's only duty is to deliver his message in full clarity.*" (Verse 12) The *sūrah* has already shown them the end suffered by earlier communities who turned away. Now it tells them that the role of God's Messenger is only to deliver His message. When he has done this, he has fulfilled the trust assigned to him and put the proof before them. What remains is the fate merited by those who are stubborn in disobedience and rejection. They have already been reminded of this.

This section concludes by restating the truth of God's oneness, which they persistently deny. It also states the believers' attitude in dealing with God: "*God: there is no deity other than Him. In God, then, let the believers place their trust.*" (Verse 13) The truth of God's oneness is the essence of faith. Its practical import is to place one's total trust in God and to rely on Him alone. This verse provides a bridge between these sections of the *sūrah* and its final one which comes as an address to the believers.

Spouses and Children as Enemies

In the final section the *sūrah* addresses the believers, warning them against failure in the test represented in the temptation spouses, children and riches offer. They are required to remain God-fearing, be obedient to Him and give willingly for His cause. They are warned against being stingy. They are further promised the doubling of their provisions, forgiveness of their sins and success. They are finally reminded of God's all-encompassing knowledge, power and wisdom:

Believers, some of your spouses and children are enemies to you; so beware of them. Yet if you overlook their faults, pardon and forgive, God is much-forgiving, ever merciful. Your wealth and children are only a trial and a temptation, whereas with God there is a great reward. Therefore, remain God-fearing as best as you can, listen, obey and be charitable. That will be best for you. Those that are preserved from their own meanness are the ones who will achieve success. If you make a goodly loan to God, He will repay you in multiples, and will forgive you your sins. God is ever thankful, forbearing. He knows all that is beyond the reach of human perception and all that is witnessed; the Almighty, the Wise. (Verses 14–18)

A man asked Ibn 'Abbās about the first verse in this section and it is reported that he told him that there were some people in Makkah who accepted Islam and wanted to join the Prophet in Madīnah, but their spouses and children prevented them. When they ultimately joined him, they realized that those who were already with the Prophet had acquired insight in their religion. Therefore, they wanted to punish their spouses and children for having kept them away. God then revealed this verse telling them: "*If you overlook their faults, pardon and forgive, God is much-forgiving, ever merciful.*" (Verse 14) This *ḥadīth* is related by al-Tirmidhī who describes it as authentic. The same opinion is expressed by 'Ikrimah, Ibn 'Abbās's disciple.

The Qur'ānic statement is wider in scope and import than this particular situation represents. For this warning is the same as that in the following verse: "*Your wealth and children are only a trial and a temptation.*" (Verse 15) Both caution against the temptation that wives, children and wealth present. The warning that some spouses and children may be one's enemies refers to a true fact in human life. In this way, the verses touch upon some intricate and complex ties in man's emotions and how they are influenced by life's circumstances. Spouses and children may divert a person's attention from God's remembrance. They may also make a man fall short of discharging the responsibilities required of his faith; this in order to spare himself the troubles that he may face as a result of fulfilling such responsibilities. A person who strives for God's cause may be exposed to much loss and may have to sacrifice a

great deal. He and his family may have to withstand much hardship. He may be willing to face such hardship himself, but cannot bear that such hardship be suffered by his wife and children. As a result, he may be tight-fisted and cowardly in order to ensure that they are safe, free of trouble and financially secure. Thus, they become his enemies as they turn him away from doing what is good and stop him from fulfilling the ultimate objective of his existence. Indeed, they may even stand in his way, stopping him from fulfilling his duty. In doing so, they may wish to spare themselves what may happen as a result, or they may not share his belief. In this way, man finds himself unable to separate himself from them and dedicate himself to God's cause. This is also a form of enmity that may vary in degrees. Furthermore, such situations are faced by believers at all times.

This very complex situation merits such a caution from God as to alert believers' hearts so that they do not allow such feelings and pressures to creep into their minds. The caution is stated again, this time as a warning against the temptation presented by wealth and children. The Arabic word used here is *fitnah*, which conveys two meanings. The first is 'trial', which makes the verse mean that God puts you to trial by giving you riches and children. He tests you in this way, so always be on the alert in order to pass your test and dedicate yourself to God. The second meaning is 'temptation', and in this sense the verse means that riches and children present temptations for you to indulge in sin. Beware then and do not allow such temptations to distract you from the way that leads to God's acceptance. Both meanings are acceptable.

Imām Aḥmad relates on the authority of Buraydah, a Companion of the Prophet: "The Prophet was delivering a sermon when al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn came wearing two red shirts and tripping as they walked. The Prophet got down from the pulpit and took them up, placing them next to him. He then said: 'God and His Messenger speak the truth: *Your wealth and children are only a trial and a temptation*. I saw these two young boys tripping as they walked, and I could not wait. I had to interrupt my speech to lift them up." Thus did the Prophet do with his two grandchildren. It is, then, a very serious matter. Therefore alerting people to it and making them aware of what it may lead to is necessary, as God, who created people and gave them their natural

feelings, knows. They can then restrain themselves so as not to allow such feelings to dictate their behaviour, knowing that such loving bonds could end up causing them what an enemy tries to cause. Therefore, when the warning is given and the encouragement is made to pass the test and to overcome the temptation, they are reminded of what God has in store for them: "*whereas with God there is a great reward.*" (Verse 15)

The believers are admonished to do their best to remain God-fearing and to obey God's orders: "*Therefore, remain God-fearing as best as you can, listen, obey and be charitable.*" (Verse 16) Here we see an aspect of God's care as He restricts what is expected of the believers to that which remains within their power and ability. He knows the limit of what they can do in obedience of Him. The Prophet says: "When I give you an order, do it as best you can, and when I prohibit something, refrain from it completely." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] Limits cannot be set on obeying an order to do something. Therefore, what is within one's ability and power is sufficient. On the other hand, prohibition cannot be divided. It is required in full.

They are also called upon to be generous in what they donate: "*And be charitable. That will be best for you.*" (Verse 16) Normally, they spend their money on their own needs. God instructs them to spend in charity what is good for themselves. Thus, when they are charitable, they are actually spending their money on what is good for themselves. The *sūrah* also depicts meanness as a plague, one they must try to get rid of. He is happy who manages to achieve this: "*Those that are preserved from their own meanness are the ones who will achieve success.*" (Verse 16)

The *sūrah* goes on encouraging them to be charitable, making it desirable for them. It describes such charity as a loan given to God. Who would want to lose the opportunity to give his Master a loan? God accepts the loan, repays it many times over, forgives the lender his sins, thanks the lender and forbears with him when he falls short of thanking Him: "*If you make a goodly loan to God, He will repay you in multiples, and will forgive you your sins. God is ever thankful, forbearing.*" (Verse 17) Blessed be God's name: how generous and great He is! It is He who creates man, His servant, and then gives him all his provisions. He then asks him to give him as a loan some of what is surplus to his needs. He

repays this loan in multiples and thanks His servant and forbears when His servant is not as grateful to Him as he should be.

God thus teaches us how to rise above our weaknesses and shortcomings and how to aspire to the sublime, trying to be like Him, albeit within our limited abilities. God has breathed of His spirit into man, so that man will always aspire to achieve this ideal, within the scope of his nature and ability. Therefore, the sublime remains open for man always to aspire to. He can try to rise step after step so that he can meet God presenting what He likes him to present and what earns him His pleasure.

The section then concludes with a statement of God's knowledge and wisdom: "*He knows all that is beyond the reach of human perception and all that is witnessed; the Almighty, the Wise.*" (Verse 18) Everything is within His knowledge, subject to His power, conducted according to His wisdom. As they go through life, people should realize that they remain under God's watchful eye, are subject to His power, and that everything takes place by His will. When this truth is appreciated by people, they will remain God-fearing and respond to Him only as they should.

SŪRAH 65

Al-Ṭalāq

(Divorce)

Prologue

This *sūrah*, Divorce, is an outline by God of the rules governing divorce, discussing in detail those cases that were not discussed in the other *sūrah* that tackles this important issue, *Sūrah* 2, The Cow. The *sūrah* also deals with a number of other family issues that result from divorce. It specifies the time when divorce may take place if it is to gain God's approval and to follow His law: "*Prophet! When you divorce women, divorce them with a view to their prescribed waiting period.*" (Verse 1) It states the divorced woman's right and duty to stay in her family home, i.e. her divorcing husband's home, during her waiting period. She cannot be turned out and should not leave of her own accord except in situations where a woman has committed an act of gross indecency: "*Do not drive them out of their homes, nor shall they themselves leave, unless they commit a flagrant indecency.*" (Verse 1) It also specifies the woman's right to leave home after the end of her waiting period and her freedom to do what she likes, unless her husband has reinstated the marriage within the waiting period. Should this occur, it should only be to resume normal married life between them. It cannot be done to cause the woman any harm or to deprive her of the chance to marry a different man: "*When they have completed their appointed term, either retain them in fair manner or part with them in fair manner.*" (Verse 2) Whichever

option is followed, retaining the marriage or allowing the break up to be complete, it should be in the presence of witnesses: "*Call to witness two persons of known probity from among yourselves.*" (Verse 2)

In *Sūrah* 2, the waiting period of a woman who has not yet reached the menopause is specified as three cycles, counting either the time of menstruation or the time of cleanliness. The scholarly difference here is based on the linguistic meaning of the term used in the *sūrah, qur'*, which applies to either period. In this *sūrah*, the waiting period of a divorced woman who has passed the menopause or who is too young to have a period is specified: "*As for those of your women who are beyond the age of monthly courses, as well as for those who do not have any courses, their waiting period, if you have any doubt, is three months.*" (Verse 4) Likewise, the waiting period of a pregnant divorcee is specified: "*As for those who are with child, their waiting term shall end when they deliver their burden.*" (Verse 4)

The *sūrah* also includes rulings on the home where a divorced woman lives during her waiting period and, if she is pregnant, her right to maintenance until she has delivered the baby: "*Let them dwell wherever you dwell, according to your means, and do not harass them so as to make their lives a misery. If they are with child, maintain them until they have delivered their burden.*" (Verse 6) The *sūrah* then goes on to give detailed rules about the breast-feeding of a divorcee's child and her right to financial compensation if she so breast-feeds the child, if the two parents agree this is in the child's best interests, as also provisions for the child's breast-feeding by another woman if the two cannot agree: "*If, after that, they suckle your infants, pay them for it. Take counsel with one another in a fair manner. If some of you make things difficult, let another woman suckle the child.*" (Verse 6) The *sūrah* then adds further details on maintenance and compensation in all cases, making it commensurate with the financial means of the divorcing husband: "*Let the one who has ample means spend in accordance with his means; and let the one whose provisions are restricted spend according to what God has given him. God does not burden anyone with more than He has given them.*" (Verse 7)

Thus, the *sūrah* takes up all divorce situations. providing detailed legislation for each context. It caters for every problem that results

from the collapse of the family, providing a comfortable solution that combines clarity with care, ease and attention to detail.

Taking Divorce Seriously

This *sūrah* is remarkable in the way it tackles divorce and the situations that may result from it. It brings together many aspects of encouragement and warning, and gives comments on every order and ruling. It links the question of divorce to God's will as it works in the heavens and the earth, and to God's law that brings destruction to those who stubbornly disobey Him. By the same token, it also provides comfort and increased provisions to those who remain God-fearing. It repeats its directive to treat the other party with kindness, forbearance and mutual consideration, always preferring to do a good turn. It holds out the prospect of people receiving better results, reminding them of God's will and how it applies to creation, the provision of sustenance, and in cases of ease and affliction.

We can only look with amazement at the numerous universal truths brought together in a *sūrah* that primarily deals with divorce. The theme is taken so seriously that the *sūrah* begins making its address to the Prophet personally, although it is intended as a general address to all believers. The *sūrah* is also remarkable in the way it deals with each situation in great detail, requiring that its provisions and rulings be implemented while maintaining a fear of God. We also note that the comments given are numerous, coupled with promises of reward and warning against punishment. These comments, long and frequent as they are, give the impression that this question is the total sum of Islam. It is the question determined by God who watches how His instructions are put into effect. Those who implement them with a genuine God-fearing sense need fear no harm, while those who procrastinate, evade or try to harm others are threatened with the sternest punishment. It raises the hope of good prospects to the community that deals with such situations in a fair, reasonable and kind manner.

We read in this *sūrah* statements like: "*Be conscious of God, your Lord... These are the bounds set by God. Whoever transgresses God's bounds wrongs his own soul. You never know; after that, God may bring about some*

new situation." (Verse 1) "*Call to witness two persons of known probity from among yourselves; and do yourselves bear witness before God. Thus is admonished everyone who believes in God and the Last Day. For everyone who fears God, He will grant a way out, and will provide for him whence he does not expect. God will be sufficient for everyone who puts his trust in Him. God always attains His purpose. God has set a measure for everything.*" (Verses 2–3) "*For everyone who is God-fearing, God makes things easy. Such is God's commandment which He has revealed to you. God will pardon the bad deeds of everyone who is God-fearing and will grant him a richl reward.*" (Verses 4–5) "*After hardship, God will grant ease.*" (Verse 7)

We also read the following stern, long and detailed warning: "*Many a community that insolently defied the commandment of their Lord and His messengers We have brought to account in a severe manner and inflicted on them terrible suffering. Thus they tasted the outcome of their own conduct. Yet the end of their conduct was ruin. God has prepared a severe punishment for them.*" (Verses 8–10) We note how it is followed with a strong caution against doing what leads to such a fate, and a reminder of the great blessing of sending God's Messenger with the light that he brings and with the promise of great reward: "*So, you who are endowed with insight, you who have faith, fear God. God has bestowed on you a reminder from on high. [He has sent you] a Messenger who recites to you God's revelations that make things clear, so that He may lead those who believe and do righteous deeds out of the depths of darkness into the light. God will admit everyone who believes in Him and does righteous deeds into gardens through which running waters flow, where they will abide for ever. God will have granted them a most excellent provision.*" (Verses 10–11) We then read how it is all concluded with a note that opens up the whole universe before us: "*It is God who has created seven heavens and likewise of the earth. His command descends through them all, so that you may learn that God has power over all things, and that God encompasses all things with His knowledge.*" (Verse 12)

All this is contained in a comment on the rulings regarding divorce. We also note that a whole *sūrah* of the Qur'ān is devoted to regulating this situation and the consequences that result from it. In this way, we see how divorce is linked to the most fundamental and essential facts of faith, both at the level of the universe and the level of the human soul,

even though divorce is a situation of ruin, not building, a severance, not initiation, and its subject matter is a family, not a state. Yet the *sūrah* gives us the impression that it is more serious than establishing a state.

What does all this signify? Its significance is varied, but in its totality it points to the sublime nature of this religion, its seriousness and its divine origin. This is clear even though nothing else points to it other than this *sūrah*. Hence, we see how the Islamic system approaches the family question with much seriousness. Islam is a system based on the family. The family home is a shelter that gives comfort. People live there nurturing ties of love, affection, mutual sympathy and care while observing values that maintain purity and the absence of lewdness. Within the family home children are reared and looked after.

> Relations within the family are shown in an atmosphere of clarity that radiates with mutual sympathy and genuine care: "*And among His signs is that He creates for you spouses out of your own kind, so that you might incline towards them, and He engenders love and tenderness between you.*" (30: 21) "*They are as a garment for you, as you are for them.*" (2: 187) Marriage, then, is a bond between two souls, based on mutual inclination, love and tenderness. It establishes a unit within which relations reflect mutual care and kindness. The very words the Qur'ān uses in reference to the family generate an air of ease and tenderness as they express the type of bond Islam wants to see within this unit, recognizing its noble objectives of helping life to continue through procreation. Therefore, these objectives are shown to be clean, pure and serious. It describes them very aptly in the following way: "*Your wives are your tilth.*" (2: 223) This description also implies fertility and increase in numbers.
>
> In keeping with its total approach to all aspects, Islam provides this homely unit with all its care and warrantees. It does not limit itself to spiritual inspiration, but also adds legal provisions and guarantees.[1]

1. Sayyid Quṭb (1982), *Al-Salām al-'Ālamī wal-Islam*, (Islam and World Peace), Beirut and Cairo, pp. 67–68.

When we look at Islamic family legislation in the Qur'ān and the *Sunnah* regarding all situations, and consider the directives accompanying the legal provisions, as well as the different influences brought to bear, and the fact that the whole question is given a direct link to God at every step, as is the case in this *sūrah* and in others, we then realize how important an institution the family is in the Islamic system. We appreciate the value God assigns to the question of the family when we remember that in the opening verse of *Sūrah* 4, Women, God states in the same sentence the requirement of fearing Him and being mindful of family ties: "*Mankind, fear your Lord, who has created you from a single soul, and from it created its mate, and from the two of them spread abroad so many men and women. Fear God, in whose name you appeal to one another, and be mindful of your ties of kinship. Indeed, God is ever watching over you.*" (4: 1) He also combines worshipping God alone with kindness to parents: "*Your Lord has ordained that you shall worship none but Him, and that you must be kind to your parents.*" (17: 23) In another *sūrah*, gratitude to God is coupled with gratitude to one's parents: "*Be grateful to Me and to your parents.*" (31: 14)

That we should take such great care is consistent with God's will that has established human life on the basis of the family. He willed that the first unit in human existence was a family made of Adam and his wife. All mankind is the progeny of this first family unit. God could have created millions of human individuals at the same time, but He chose to let all humanity begin with a single unit because He wished to give the family a momentous role in human life. Family life meets the requirements of human nature and allows human abilities and character to develop. It also nurtures the child's talents and strengthens his potential. The most profound influences on man are seen within the family. Therefore, the Islamic system, which represents the final and complete divine code for human life, fits perfectly with God's will that brought man into existence. Such harmony is observed in everything that comes from God.

The second message that the *sūrah*'s serious approach to marital and family matters delivers is how the Islamic system wishes to elevate these human ties to a sacred level that sees them linked to God. In essence,

they are made a means for spiritual purification. This contrasts with the way they have been viewed in idolatrous beliefs and in distorted religion that has moved far away from dealing with human nature.

> Islam neither suppresses natural feelings nor considers them dirty. It only regulates, purifies and elevates them above the physical level so that they become central to many psychological and social values. By contrast, adultery, and prostitution in particular, removes from such natural desires all the exquisite feelings, attractions and values that have been refined over the long history of human life. It leaves such desires naked, dirty and coarser than in animals. In many animal and bird species, couples live together in a regulated life. They do not have the sort of sexual chaos that adultery spreads in some human communities, particularly where prostitution is rife.[2]

Islam considers marriage a means to maintain one's purity. It calls on the Muslim community to facilitate the marriage of men and women, should money become an obstacle to marriage: "*Marry the single from among you as well as such of your male and female slaves as are virtuous. If they are poor, God will grant them sufficiency out of His bounty. God is Munificent, All-Knowing. As for those who are unable to marry, let them live in continence until God grants them sufficiency out of His bounty.*" (24: 32–33) It calls marriage *iḥṣān*, which means protection. Thus, believers develop the concept that staying without protection, even for a short period, does not earn God's favour. 'Alī explained the reason for his marriage shortly after the death of his first wife, Fāṭimah, the Prophet's daughter thus: "I feared to meet God when I was without a wife." Marriage is, then, one of the acts of obedience to God, and by which a believer hopes to improve his position with God. The marital tie becomes to him a sacred one since it is part of obeying God.

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2. Sayyid Qutb (2006), *In the Shade of the Qur'ān*, Leicester, Islamic Foundation, Vol. XII, p. 269.

A Realistic Approach to Marriage

This *sūrah* and similar ones like it indicate the realistic nature of the Islamic approach to life and to human nature. It accepts human nature as it is and works upon its potentials and circumstances. Therefore, it does not stop at either providing detailed legislation on a matter that is left to people's consciences or issuing directives. Instead, it uses both in its approach to the human soul and to practical life.

To start with, the marriage bond is meant to be permanent and well established. Islam adds a host of guarantees to ensure that it remains so, raising it to the level of fulfilling God's orders. It enables state funds to be used to help poor men and women marry. It legislates for the observance of values that prevent exposing physical charms so as to tempt the other sex, this so that desires are settled within a proper and legitimate framework. It prescribes punishments for adultery and false accusations of adultery. It protects the sanctity of homes by requiring people to ask permission before entering, and defines that people inside the home should ask permission before entering other rooms. Islam also regulates marital ties with specific rules and laws. It establishes the family system on the basis that one of the two partners is responsible for taking full care of the family, the man, as he is better suited for this responsibility. In this way, Islam prevents conflict and disorder within the family. Further safeguards are put in place to work together with directives utilizing people's emotions. It adds to all this the fact that this bond and its preservation are an essential aspect of being God-fearing.

Yet practical human life shows that there are situations that end in ruin, despite all the guarantees and safeguards. These must be faced in a practical way. Denial is of no use when the continuity of marital life becomes almost impossible. To hold on to marriage in such cases serves no purpose.

> Islam does not rush to enforce a break-up of the marriage once conflict erupts. On the contrary, it tries hard to hold on to it, allowing it to break only when there is no other way.
>
> Islam addresses men: "*Consort with them in a goodly manner. Even if you are averse to them, it may well be that you are averse to something*

> *in which God has placed much good.*" (4: 19) Thus it encourages them to take things easy and to persevere, even when they are averse to their wives. It opens up a window for them as regards something they may not know: "*It may well be that you are averse to something in which God has placed much good.*" These women to whom they are averse may bring them much good, which they are unaware of. If God has this good in store for them, they must not let it go to waste. Nothing is more effective in working on emotions so as to control feelings of hate and moderate them.
>
> Should the matter go beyond feelings of like or dislike and reach a point of incompatibility and irreconcilability, Islam does not rush to recommend divorce. Rather, it recommends an attempt by well-wishers to achieve reconciliation: "*If you have reason to fear that a breach may occur between a (married) couple, appoint an arbiter from among his people and an arbiter from among her people. If they both want to set things aright, God will bring about their reconciliation. God is indeed All-Knowing, aware of all things.*" (4: 35) "*If a woman has reason to fear ill-treament or desertion by her husband, it shall not be wrong for the two of them if they should try to set things peacefully to rights between them; for peace is best.*" (4: 128)
>
> If all such intermediation fails, and there appear to be things that prevent a tolerably peaceful life, then the split is serious. To retain the marriage in such circumstances would inevitably lead to failure. The pressures involved would compound the already adverse effects on the people involved. Hence, it is wise to accept the facts and put an end to the marriage. Islam in no way likes this, but views it as necessary. We should always remember that of all lawful things, God dislikes divorce most.[3]

Even if the man wants to divorce his wife, this is not instantaneously possible. The proper thing is for divorce to take place when the woman is not in her monthly period, and provided that no sexual intercourse had taken place between the couple. This means that a delay takes

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3. Sayyid Quṭb (1982), *Al-Salām al-'Ālamī wal-Islam*, (Islam and World Peace), Beirut and Cairo, pp. 84–85.

place, which could overcome the anger and provide an opportunity for the couple to review their situation. In this way, they may reflect and be more inclined to make peace. Divorce may then not take place as a result of this initial delay.

Moreover, there is the waiting period: three monthly cycles, or three months in the case of a divorced woman who has passed the menopause or until childbirth if the woman is pregnant. During this waiting period, the reinstatement of the marriage is possible if a change of heart takes place and the couple want to resume their married life.

Yet all these attempts do not negate the fact that a total split may occur and that there are situations that need to be practically regulated. Islam addresses these situations putting in place legislation to take care of all the aspects involved. Hence, we have the detailed provisions included in this *sūrah*, which show the practical Islamic approach to life's problems in a way that ensures progress and maintains purity.

Eradicating Traces of *Jāhiliyyah*

This *sūrah* with all that it includes of encouragement, warnings, emphasis, detailed provisions and telling comments clearly indicates that it was addressing certain situations that continued to carry traces of the days of ignorance, marked by the ill-treatment of women and gross injustice towards them. Hence, strong influences are brought to bear on people's minds together with detailed provisions to close any loopholes that may allow evasion of the rules and a return to the old ignorant concepts that led to unhealthy marital relations.

This did not apply to Arabia only. It was common throughout the world. Women were treated in the same way as slaves, or worse than slaves, in almost all parts of the world. In some communities, sex was viewed as filthy and women were thought of as evil, tempting men to indulge in such filth. It was from such depths of global ignorance that Islam raised women and marital relations to their high and pure levels, giving women their rightful positions of honour and putting in place safeguards to protect their rights. No little girl would now be the victim of infanticide. Furthermore, when she reached a marriageable age, she could no longer be forced into marriage against her will. Whether virgin

or mature, a woman must give her consent before she can be married. As a wife, a woman has full and protected rights, and she further enjoys the safeguards provided by Islamic law. If divorced, a woman has the rights detailed in this *sūrah* and in *Sūrah* 2, The Cow, as also revealed elsewhere in the Qur'ān and *Sunnah*.

At its own initiative, Islam put all these legislative provisions in place. It was not a response to a feeling among women in Arabia or anywhere else in the world that their situation was unsatisfactory, or to a twinge of conscience among men that required fairness to women. There was no association of women in Arabia or anywhere else for that matter demanding reforms; nor were there any female members of any consultative or legislative assembly. Indeed, not a single voice demanded an improvement in women's status. These legal provisions were part of the code made in heaven for implementation on earth, to ensure fairness to all its people. It was God's will to raise human life from the depth of ignorance into which it had sunk, purge marital relations from their shameful status and to give to man and woman, created originally from a single soul, all their human rights that preserve their honour and dignity.

Islam is a noble religion. Only a perverted ignorant will stand in opposition to it. For, no one abandons God's law in preference for human law except through the pressures of desire and a clinging to worldly pleasures.

Having reviewed the subject matter of the *sūrah* in general terms, we will now discuss the provisions it puts in place. When we look at them within the context of the *sūrah*, we find that they reflect life and movement and that they are full of inspiration. This is the difference between looking at such provisions within their Qur'ānic context and studying them in books of Islamic law.

Al-Ṭalāq (Divorce)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

Prophet! When you[4] divorce women, divorce them with a view to their prescribed waiting period, and reckon the period accurately. Be conscious of God, your Lord. Do not drive them out of their homes, nor shall they themselves leave, unless they commit a flagrant indecency. These are the bounds set by God. Whoever transgresses God's bounds wrongs his own soul. You never know; after that, God may bring about some new situation. (1)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّبِيُّ إِذَا طَلَّقْتُمُ ٱلنِّسَآءَ فَطَلِّقُوهُنَّ لِعِدَّتِهِنَّ وَأَحْصُوا۟ ٱلْعِدَّةَ وَٱتَّقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ رَبَّكُمْ لَا تُخْرِجُوهُنَّ مِنۢ بُيُوتِهِنَّ وَلَا يَخْرُجْنَ إِلَّآ أَن يَأْتِينَ بِفَٰحِشَةٍ مُّبَيِّنَةٍ وَتِلْكَ حُدُودُ ٱللَّهِ وَمَن يَتَعَدَّ حُدُودَ ٱللَّهِ فَقَدْ ظَلَمَ نَفْسَهُۥ لَا تَدْرِى لَعَلَّ ٱللَّهَ يُحْدِثُ بَعْدَ ذَٰلِكَ أَمْرًا ﴿١﴾

When they have completed their appointed term, either retain them in fair manner or part with them in fair manner. Call to witness two persons of known probity from among yourselves; and do yourselves bear witness before God. Thus is admonished everyone who believes in God and the Last Day. For everyone who fears God, He will grant a way out, (2)

فَإِذَا بَلَغْنَ أَجَلَهُنَّ فَأَمْسِكُوهُنَّ بِمَعْرُوفٍ أَوْ فَارِقُوهُنَّ بِمَعْرُوفٍ وَأَشْهِدُوا۟ ذَوَىْ عَدْلٍ مِّنكُمْ وَأَقِيمُوا۟ ٱلشَّهَٰدَةَ لِلَّهِ ذَٰلِكُمْ يُوعَظُ بِهِۦ مَن كَانَ يُؤْمِنُ بِٱللَّهِ وَٱلْيَوْمِ ٱلْءَاخِرِ وَمَن يَتَّقِ ٱللَّهَ يَجْعَل لَّهُۥ مَخْرَجًا ﴿٢﴾

4. The plural form is used here indicating that the address is to the Muslim community as a whole.

and will provide for him whence he does not expect. God will be sufficient for everyone who puts his trust in Him. God always attains His purpose. God has set a measure for everything. (3)

وَيَرْزُقْهُ مِنْ حَيْثُ لَا يَحْتَسِبُ ۚ وَمَن يَتَوَكَّلْ
عَلَى اللَّهِ فَهُوَ حَسْبُهُ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ بَالِغُ أَمْرِهِ ۚ
قَدْ جَعَلَ اللَّهُ لِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدْرًا ﴿٣﴾

As for those of your women who are beyond the age of monthly courses, as well as for those who do not have any courses, their waiting period, if you have any doubt, is three months. As for those who are with child, their waiting term shall end when they deliver their burden. For everyone who is God-fearing, God makes things easy. (4)

وَاللَّائِي يَئِسْنَ مِنَ الْمَحِيضِ مِن نِّسَائِكُمْ
إِنِ ارْتَبْتُمْ فَعِدَّتُهُنَّ ثَلَاثَةُ أَشْهُرٍ
وَاللَّائِي لَمْ يَحِضْنَ ۚ وَأُولَاتُ الْأَحْمَالِ
أَجَلُهُنَّ أَن يَضَعْنَ حَمْلَهُنَّ ۚ وَمَن يَتَّقِ
اللَّهَ يَجْعَل لَّهُ مِنْ أَمْرِهِ يُسْرًا ﴿٤﴾

Such is God's commandment which He has revealed to you. God will pardon the bad deeds of everyone who is God-fearing and will grant him a rich reward. (5)

ذَٰلِكَ أَمْرُ اللَّهِ أَنزَلَهُ إِلَيْكُمْ ۚ وَمَن يَتَّقِ اللَّهَ
يُكَفِّرْ عَنْهُ سَيِّئَاتِهِ وَيُعْظِمْ لَهُ أَجْرًا ﴿٥﴾

Let them dwell wherever you dwell, according to your means, and do not harass them so as to make their lives a misery. If they are with child, maintain them until they have delivered their burden. If, after that, they suckle your infants, pay them for it.

أَسْكِنُوهُنَّ مِنْ حَيْثُ سَكَنتُم مِّن وُجْدِكُمْ
وَلَا تُضَارُّوهُنَّ لِتُضَيِّقُوا عَلَيْهِنَّ ۚ وَإِن كُنَّ
أُولَاتِ حَمْلٍ فَأَنفِقُوا عَلَيْهِنَّ حَتَّىٰ يَضَعْنَ
حَمْلَهُنَّ ۚ فَإِنْ أَرْضَعْنَ لَكُمْ فَآتُوهُنَّ

Take counsel with one another in a fair manner. If some of you make things difficult, let another woman suckle the child. (6)

أُجُورَهُنَّ وَأْتَمِرُوا بَيْنَكُم بِمَعْرُوفٍ وَإِن
تَعَاسَرْتُمْ فَسَتُرْضِعُ لَهُ أُخْرَىٰ ٦

Let the one who has ample means spend in accordance with his means; and let the one whose provisions are restricted spend according to what God has given him. God does not burden anyone with more than He has given them. After hardship, God will grant ease. (7)

لِيُنفِقْ ذُو سَعَةٍ مِّن سَعَتِهِ وَمَن
قُدِرَ عَلَيْهِ رِزْقُهُ فَلْيُنفِقْ مِمَّا آتَاهُ
اللَّهُ لَا يُكَلِّفُ اللَّهُ نَفْسًا إِلَّا مَا آتَاهَا
سَيَجْعَلُ اللَّهُ بَعْدَ عُسْرٍ يُسْرًا ٧

Many a community that insolently defied the commandment of their Lord and His messengers We have brought to account in a severe manner and inflicted on them terrible suffering. (8)

وَكَأَيِّن مِّن قَرْيَةٍ عَتَتْ عَنْ أَمْرِ رَبِّهَا
وَرُسُلِهِ فَحَاسَبْنَاهَا حِسَابًا شَدِيدًا
وَعَذَّبْنَاهَا عَذَابًا نُّكْرًا ٨

Thus they tasted the outcome of their own conduct. Yet the end of their conduct was ruin. (9)

فَذَاقَتْ وَبَالَ أَمْرِهَا وَكَانَ عَاقِبَةُ
أَمْرِهَا خُسْرًا ٩

God has prepared a severe punishment for them. So, you who are endowed with insight, you who have faith, fear God. God has bestowed on you a reminder from on high. (10)

أَعَدَّ اللَّهُ لَهُمْ عَذَابًا شَدِيدًا فَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ
يَا أُولِي الْأَلْبَابِ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا قَدْ أَنزَلَ
اللَّهُ إِلَيْكُمْ ذِكْرًا ١٠

[He has sent you] a Messenger who recites to you God's revelations that make things clear, so that He may lead those who believe and do righteous deeds out of the depths of darkness into the light. God will admit everyone who believes in Him and does righteous deeds into gardens through which running waters flow, where they will abide for ever. God will have granted them a most excellent provision. (11)

رَّسُولًا يَتْلُوا عَلَيْكُمْ ءَايَٰتِ ٱللَّهِ مُبَيِّنَٰتٍ لِّيُخْرِجَ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ مِنَ ٱلظُّلُمَٰتِ إِلَى ٱلنُّورِ ۚ وَمَن يُؤْمِنۢ بِٱللَّهِ وَيَعْمَلْ صَٰلِحًا يُدْخِلْهُ جَنَّٰتٍ تَجْرِى مِن تَحْتِهَا ٱلْأَنْهَٰرُ خَٰلِدِينَ فِيهَآ أَبَدًا ۖ قَدْ أَحْسَنَ ٱللَّهُ لَهُۥ رِزْقًا ﴿١١﴾

It is God who has created seven heavens and likewise of the earth. His command descends through them all, so that you may learn that God has power over all things, and that God encompasses all things with His knowledge. (12)

ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِى خَلَقَ سَبْعَ سَمَٰوَٰتٍ وَمِنَ ٱلْأَرْضِ مِثْلَهُنَّ يَتَنَزَّلُ ٱلْأَمْرُ بَيْنَهُنَّ لِتَعْلَمُوٓا أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَىْءٍ قَدِيرٌ وَأَنَّ ٱللَّهَ قَدْ أَحَاطَ بِكُلِّ شَىْءٍ عِلْمًۢا ﴿١٢﴾

The Process of Divorce

Prophet! When you divorce women, divorce them with a view to their prescribed waiting period, and reckon the period accurately. Be conscious of God, your Lord. Do not drive them out of their homes, nor shall they themselves leave, unless they commit a flagrant indecency. These are the bounds set by God. Whoever transgresses God's bounds wrongs his own soul. You never know; after that, God may bring about some new situation. (Verse 1)

This is the first stage and the first rule. It is addressed in the first instance to the Prophet, but it is soon realized that it is a general rule

applicable to every Muslim, not to the Prophet in isolation. In the sentence starting with, '*when you divorce women*', the pronoun 'you' is used in the plural form throughout. This stylistic form is employed to alert attention and imply the seriousness of the matter under discussion. God addresses it to the Prophet in person, giving him His instructions and directives, so that he will, in turn, deliver it to those who follow him. The psychological impact achieved in this way is both strong and clear.

"*When you divorce women, divorce them with a view to their prescribed waiting period.*" (Verse 1) An authentic *ḥadīth* related by al-Bukhārī explains this directive: "'Abdullāh ibn 'Umar divorced his wife when she was in the midst of her menstrual period. 'Umar mentioned this to the Prophet who was clearly angry. He said to 'Umar: 'Tell him to take her back and keep her until she has finished her period, then through her cleanliness cycle and her next menstrual period. When she is clean again if he still wants to divorce her, he should do so before he has intercourse with her. This is when the waiting period which God has ordained starts." Muslim also relates this *ḥadīth* but the last sentence in his version runs as follows: "This is the start of the waiting period which God ordered that women should be divorced with a view to."

It is clear, then, that there is a time when the divorce process can rightly start. A man cannot divorce his wife at any time; he can only do so when his wife is in a period of cleanliness from menstruation during which they have had no sexual intercourse. Other statements indicate that there is another time when the divorce process can be started, which is if the woman is clearly pregnant. The purpose behind limiting the time to these two situations is to delay the divorce for a while after the man has decided to so separate from his wife. During this time, tension may subside if it is of a transitory type and the couple may resume a normal life together. On the other hand, it also ensures that the woman is not pregnant before they embark on divorce. After all, a man may be inclined not to divorce his wife when he learns that she is pregnant. If he still resorts to divorce when he has become aware of her pregnancy, this means that his mind is made up. To sum up, the condition that the wife should be in cleanliness from menstruation without any intervening sexual intercourse is so as to ensure that she is

not pregnant, and the condition that the pregnancy should be clearly determined is to ensure that the man is aware of it. This, then, is the first attempt to deal with cracks in the family structure, and to stop the axe that seeks to destroy it.[5]

Yet this does not mean that divorce does not occur except in these two periods; it occurs whenever it is pronounced,[6] but it will be frowned upon by God, and it will incur the anger of God's Messenger. This is sufficient for a good believer to hold on and not to pronounce the word of divorce until the appropriate time, leaving the matter to God to determine its outcome as He pleases.

"*And reckon the period accurately.*" This is important, so that the waiting period is not made too long as to harm the divorcee, preventing her from remarriage after her waiting period is over. On the other hand, the first purpose of making sure that she is not pregnant will not be properly fulfilled if the waiting period is cut short. Moreover, this directive implies the seriousness of the matter and that God watches us and requires those involved to be careful at every step.

"*Be conscious of God, your Lord. Do not drive them out of their homes, nor shall they themselves leave, unless they commit a flagrant indecency.*" (Verse 1) This is the first caution that follows the address. It is given by God to emphasize the need to maintain fear of Him in all situations. This caution is stated before the order not to turn divorced women out of their homes. Although these are their husbands' homes, they are called here 'their homes' so as to emphasize the woman's right to stay there during the waiting period. Women must not be driven out of these homes; nor should they leave of their own accord, except in a situation where a divorcing woman commits a flagrant indecency. Reports suggest that such an indecency might entail adultery and the need for the woman

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5. Some readers may wonder about the woman's right to initiate a termination of the marriage. Islam legislates separately for this situation. Verse 229 of *Sūrah* 2 includes a provision for it, and the *Sunnah* provides more details. Such termination at the wife's request is called *khul'* in Islamic law. Hence, the provisions related to divorce are related to the husband, because he is the one required to take care of all complications resulting from divorce. – Editor's note.

6. This is the view of the majority of scholars, but a minority hold that it does not occur unless it takes place in one of these two periods only.

to receive her punishment, or it might entail her causing harm to her husband's family, or rebellion against her husband and doing what harms him, even though he is a divorcing husband. The purpose of the woman staying in her husband's home is to allow every chance for reconciliation and the reawakening of tender feelings and memories of shared things between the couple. This situation means that the couple will be apart because of the divorce that has been set in process, yet they are close physically. Should she sink so low that she commits adultery, or should she cause harm to her husband's family or rebel against him, this leaves no room for the reawakening of compassionate feelings. Nor is there any need for her to stay with her husband any longer. In fact, their proximity would only deepen the break, rather than heal it.

"*These are the bounds set by God. Whoever transgresses God's bounds wrongs his own soul.*" (Verse 1) This is the second warning. It is God who watches the implementation of this rule. Would any believer deliberately contravene the bounds God sets in place? To do so would be to bring ruin to those involved. "*Whoever transgresses God's bounds wrongs his own soul.*" He exposes himself to God's anger. He wrongs himself by wronging his wife, when the two are created from a single soul. Thus any wrong that befalls her rebounds on him also. Besides, "*you never know; after that, God may bring about some new situation.*" (Verse 1) This is an inspiring statement. Who knows how God's order to divorced woman to observe a waiting period during which she stays in her husband's home will work to fulfil His will? This order gives a little hope and kindles a faint light that may yet bring about an immeasurably good result. Things may change, and conflict may give way to reconciliation and contentment. God's will is always active, changing things and creating new situations. To submit to His will and observe His orders is for the better. Being conscious of Him and always on our guard lest we do what is sinful ensures an abundance of goodness.

People tend to think only of the present moment and the situation they are in with all its circumstances and difficulties. They may not look up to the future, remaining imprisoned within the present moment feeling that it will continue for ever. They feel that what they are going through now will be their permanent lot. This sort of psychological imprisonment can be terribly detrimental. Yet the truth is different,

because God's will always changes things and brings about what people have never thought possible. It opens up hope, bringing ease after hardship. God initiates at any moment situations that might never have been dreamt of.

God wants this truth to be clearly understood by us so that we will continue to look up with hope to what He puts before us. We must always be optimistic, thinking of what He may grant us and what prospects He opens before us. We should always remember that the next moment can bring something beyond our wildest dreams: "*You never know; after that, God may bring about some new situation.*" (Verse 1)

Fairness in All Situations

> *When they have completed their appointed term, either retain them in fair manner or part with them in fair manner. Call to witness two persons of known probity from among yourselves; and do yourselves bear witness before God. Thus is admonished everyone who believes in God and the Last Day. For everyone who fears God, He will grant a way out, and will provide for him whence he does not expect. God will be sufficient for everyone who puts his trust in Him. God always attains His purpose. God has set a measure for everything.* (Verses 2–3)

These two verses deal with the next stage, stating its rulings. Completing the term means the end of the waiting period. While the divorced woman is in her waiting period, whatever its length be, her husband may take her back in marriage and she regains her status as his wife. This is what is referred to in the verse as 'retain them'. Likewise, he may allow the waiting period to reach its specified end when his divorced wife will part with him and she cannot be lawful to him again unless they go through a fresh marriage contract, just as if he had taken a new wife. In either situation, the divorcing husband is commanded to behave in fairness. He is prohibited from retaining her so as to harm her. A man may retain his divorced wife shortly before the end of her waiting period then divorce her a second and a third time to prevent her from marrying someone else. He may also retain her to leave her, as it were, in a state of suspense, and so put further pressure on her causing her to offer to forgo

her rights in order to gain her divorce. Both situations were common practice at the time this *sūrah* was revealed. They continue to take place when people deviate from the path of fearing God, which is the most important guarantee of the implementation of His rules governing cases of family relations and break ups. Husbands are also forbidden to harm their divorcees by verbal abuse of any sort. The marriage bond is set in place on the basis of fairness and must end, when it is terminated, in a fair manner, so that the couple retain good feelings towards each other. They may, for all they know, resume life together in the future, and they will not then want to have any painful memory of verbal abuse that may cast a shadow on their new relation. Besides, this is the sort of good manners that Islam wants all its followers to abide by.

In either case of complete parting or reinstatement of the marriage, two witnesses of known probity are required, so that no doubt about the marriage status should remain. People may learn of the divorce, but the reinstatement of the marriage may escape their attention, which may lead to doubts and gossip. Islam wants all marital matters to remain clean and clear, in reality, in people's feelings and in their conversations. According to some scholars, but not others, the reinstatement of the marriage, as well as the full divorce, are completed without witnesses, but some make it a condition for the reinstatement of the marriage only. It is agreed, however, that witnesses are needed after or at the time of complete parting or the reinstatement of the marriage. Both views are expressed.

Having established the ruling, comments and directives follow in succession: "*Do yourselves bear witness before God.*" (Verse 2) The issue is one in which God is concerned, and the witnesses are called in for His sake. It is He who has ruled that witnesses are needed, and He watches how this is done and gives rewards for it. The witnesses are dealing with Him directly, not with either of the divorcing couple or with the general public. "*Thus is admonished everyone who believes in God and the Last Day.*" (Verse 2) These rulings are addressed to people who believe in the Day of Judgement. The *sūrah* tells them this admonition applies to them in particular. If they truly believe in God and the Last Day, they will be admonished. This is the test of their faith. It proves whether their claims to be believers are true or not.

"*For everyone who fears God, He will grant a way out, and will provide for him whence he does not expect.*" (Verses 2–3) He will grant God-fearing people a way out of any tight situation in this present life and in the life to come. He will also give them their provisions from where they neither know nor expect. This is a general statement describing a permanent situation. However, stating it here in the context of the rulings concerning divorce suggests that this is particularly true when people remain God-fearing in dealing with this particular situation. This is when the most important means of control come from within oneself and from one's own conscience. There is much scope for misuse of resources and for the appropriation of what does not rightfully belong to oneself. Only fear of God and a sensitive conscience provide effective restraint.

"*God will be sufficient for everyone who puts his trust in Him. God always attains His purpose.*" (Verse 3) Again, wicked scheming has wide scope and can take different routes in this relationship. Indeed, trying to avoid wicked scheming by one party may make the other resort to wicked scheming of their own. This statement impresses on people that they should not attempt anything of the sort. Rather, they should place their trust in God; this is sufficient for anyone. God always accomplishes what He wants. Whatever He has willed has already taken place. Therefore, to rely on Him is to rely on the One who is able, powerful and always brings about the results He seeks. It should be noted that this Qur'ānic statement is general and aims to instil into people the right concept with regard to God's will and power. Including it here with the rulings on divorce suggests that it has important significance and effect in this very crucial social matter.

"*God has set a measure for everything.*" (Verse 3) Everything is given its due measure, accomplished at the place, time and with the circumstances set for it. Hence, it is the result of its particular causes and produces its own results. Nothing is the result of blind coincidence, either within man and his life or in the universe at large. This is an important aspect of the Islamic concept.[7] Yet mentioning it here relates it to the rulings God has given concerning divorce, its timing, waiting period and witnesses.

7. We spoke in detail about this truth in our commentary on verse 2, *Sūrah* 25, in Vol. XII, pp. 379–382, and also in commenting on verse 49, *Sūrah* 54, in Vol. XVI.

All these rulings are thus given an extra aspect of being part of God's overall law and give us the feeling that the serious view Islam takes of divorce is part of the seriousness of the system God has established for the universe.

More on the Waiting Period

> *As for those of your women who are beyond the age of monthly courses, as well as for those who do not have any courses, their waiting period, if you have any doubt, is three months. As for those who are with child, their waiting term shall end when they deliver their burden. For everyone who is God-fearing, God makes things easy. Such is God's commandment which He has revealed to you. God will pardon the bad deeds of everyone who is God-fearing and will grant him a rich reward.* (Verses 4–5)

These verses specify the length of the waiting period for women who do not have a monthly cycle and for pregnant women. It includes women who are past the menopause and those who do not as yet have a menstrual cycle because they have not attained puberty or because of a malfunction in their system. The length of the waiting period for women generally is determined in verse 228, *Sūrah* 2, as three menstrual periods or three periods of cleanliness from menses. Hence, there remained the question of how long a woman who does not have a monthly cycle should wait. This verse removes all doubt, setting the waiting period for such women at three months. Pregnant women wait until they have delivered their child, regardless of whether this provides a short or a long waiting period. Once a woman has given birth, it is absolutely certain that she is not pregnant. Hence, there is no need for her to have any extended waiting period. If such a woman is divorced, her divorce is complete once she has given birth. The process of her divorce is completed and the marriage cannot be reinstated without a fresh marriage contract. God has set a measure for everything, and every ruling of His has its wise purpose.

This ruling is followed by inspiring comments: "*For everyone who is God-fearing, God makes things easy.*" (Verse 4) Ease is the ultimate

blessing that anyone hopes for. When God bestows this great favour on His servants, making things easy for them so that they encounter neither difficulty nor hardship, they will approach matters gently, achieve what they desire easily through their endeavours and happily accept the outcome. Thus they live in ease and comfort until they are due to meet their Lord. Do we see here a temptation for people to approach divorce with ease and in return their life will generally become easy?

"*Such is God's commandment which He has revealed to you.*" (Verse 5) This is a totally different touch, alerting us to the source of the order. It is given by God to those who believe in Him. To obey the order is to make the belief and the bond with God a practical reality. Then we have further emphasis on the need to remain always God-fearing, particularly in connection with what people may do in cases of divorce: "*God will pardon the bad deeds of everyone who is God-fearing and will grant him a rich reward.*" (Verse 5) The first reward is to make things easy for us, and the second is to forgive us our sins and to increase our reward for good deeds. It is a very generous and exciting offer, yet it is made in the form of a general statement and a promise that applies to all. However, it imparts a particular colour to the question of divorce and gives us a reminder of God's great bounty. Why would anyone, then, make things hard and complicated when God promises such a great reward for making things easy?

Maintenance and Breast-Feeding

> *Let them dwell wherever you dwell, according to your means, and do not harass them so as to make their lives a misery. If they are with child, maintain them until they have delivered their burden. If, after that, they suckle your infants, pay them for it. Take counsel with one another in a fair manner. If some of you make things difficult, let another woman suckle the child. Let the one who has ample means spend in accordance with his means; and let the one whose provisions are restricted spend according to what God has given him. God does not burden anyone with more than He has given them. After hardship, God will grant ease.* (Verses 6–7)

These verses state the final provisions concerning the issue of a divorcee staying in her home, which is the home she has shared with her husband, and her maintenance during the waiting period, whatever its length be. Husbands are commanded to provide them with a dwelling of the standard they can afford. They cannot give them an inferior home to their own or to what they can afford. They must not intentionally try to harass them by giving them a sub-standard dwelling place or by ill-treating them. Pregnant women are given special mention with regard to maintenance – which is due by right to every divorced woman – because the extra length of her waiting period may lead some people to think that maintenance is due for only a part of the waiting period, or that it may go further than the waiting period should it be very short. Hence, clarification is needed, requiring the maintenance to be paid until the end of the waiting period.

Breast-feeding of the child is also discussed in detail. It is not made a duty of the mother that gives her no return. As long as she continues to breast-feed the child, which belongs to them both, she is entitled to receive some wages to help her with life's necessities and to ensure that her milk continues to flow for the benefit of the child. We see how Islamic law takes care of every aspect of the mother's needs. At the same time, both parents are commanded to consult with each other in a fair manner concerning their child, ensuring what is best for it. The child is a trust given to both of them. Their failure to maintain their relation as sound and healthy should not be made to rebound on their child.

Such is the easy approach that God calls on them both to pursue. Should they take a hardened attitude and be unwilling or unable to agree on the child's breast-feeding and the compensation due for it, the child's rights are guaranteed: "*If some of you make things difficult, let another woman suckle the child.*" (Verse 6) The mother must not object to such an arrangement in a way that jeopardizes the child's right to breast-feeding. This arrangement is resorted to only because she and the child's father take a hard attitude and cannot agree on suitable arrangements.

Further details are then given concerning the level of maintenance, which should ensure ease, fairness and cooperation. The man must be fair and the woman must not be unreasonable: "*Let the one who has ample means spend in accordance with his means; and let the one whose provisions*

are restricted spend according to what God has given him." (Verse 7) The person to whom God has given in plenty should be generous in what he gives to his divorced wife in respect of her housing, maintenance and compensation for breast-feeding their child. The one who has limited provisions is not to be blamed for giving according to his means. God does not require anyone to spend above their means. It is He who gives us what we have. No one can have anything other than what God has given him, because there is no other source from which people may take anything. His is the only treasure on which all creatures depend: "*God does not burden anyone with more than He has given them.*" (Verse 7)

Then follows a gentle touch that is bound to please and open a window of hope for both parties: "*After hardship, God will grant ease.*" (Verse 7) It is through God alone that hardship is followed by ease and generous provisions are given after means have been restricted. It behoves both parties then to pin their hopes on Him alone, watching Him in their dealings with each other and maintaining an attitude based on fearing Him in all their affairs. It is to Him that they look up with hope, and it is He who provides comfort and ease after difficulty and hardship.

A Holistic Approach to Divorce

By this point, the *sūrah* has completed its discussion of all rulings concerning divorce and its effect on the family. It has dealt with all consequences, providing a clear provision for each. The split in the family home thus leaves neither ruins nor dust that settles over hearts and souls. No problem is left unsolved. The split family is not left in lingering turmoil.

Thus the *sūrah* deals with all thoughts and fears that may occur. The husband is assured that he will not suffer poverty or loss of fortune if he provides his divorcee with a good home and proper maintenance, or gives generous compensation for the breast-feeding of his child. The same fears are removed from the woman's mind so that she is not worried about a life of poverty. Likewise, she must not entertain thoughts of receiving an unfair share of her ex-husband's money. Both are assured that a God-fearing approach will see them in ease after hardship, comfort after difficulty and provisions that come from where they do not expect.

What is more is that God will grant such God-fearing people ample reward in the life to come. It is a promise that will see their sins wiped out and their reward multiplied.

The *sūrah* also deals with the after-effects of the dispute that has led to the divorce. There may be lingering feelings of resentment, anger and bitterness. All these are cleared with a gentle, comforting touch and replaced with hope in God's mercy. The *sūrah* here taps feelings of fairness and compassion, relying on the God-fearing value it implants in people's hearts and the desire to win His pleasure.

This holistic approach and its inspiring touches, together with confirmed and repeated assurances, provide the only guarantees to implement these legal provisions Islam puts in place. The only control is that brought about by a sensitive conscience and a God-fearing heart. Each of the divorcing couple can cause the other no end of heartache and problems if they have nothing to limit their area of manoeuvre other than the limits of the law. Some of the Qur'ānic commandments given in the *sūrah* are so flexible as to address all aspects of this whole area. Take, for example, the order: "*Do not harass them.*" (Verse 6) This prohibits all aspects of harassment which no legal provision, however wide in scope, can incorporate. Its implementation is attached to conscience which is profoundly influenced by the approach the *sūrah* takes and to the enhanced God-fearing sense it instils in both parties. They realize that God is aware even of their innermost thoughts. His knowledge encompasses all. Besides, they will hope to receive the compensation He grants to His God-fearing servants in both this life and in the life to come, particularly in relation to provisions and livelihood. This message is repeated in different ways in the *sūrah* because it has a telling effect in easing the hardship that divorce generates and softens the attitudes of both parties.

When they bear all these rulings and directives in mind, a divorcing couple retain on parting some seeds of their old mutual affection and cordial feeling which may yet send up new shoots. In all these rulings and provisions we see the high moral standard that Islam wants to impart to the life of the Muslim community.

The Fate of the Disobedient

When the *sūrah* has completed all this, it provides the ultimate lesson referring to the fates of those communities that defied God's commandments and disobeyed His messengers. They neither listened to admonition, nor responded to calls given them by their prophets. The lessons derived from their fates are thus placed before us, reminding all of the miserable fate that awaits those who do not fear God and who disobey Him. It also reminds people of the grace God bestows on believers, to whom the legislation is addressed:

> *Many a community that insolently defied the commandment of their Lord and His messengers We have brought to account in a severe manner and inflicted on them terrible suffering. Thus they tasted the outcome of their own conduct. Yet the end of their conduct was ruin. God has prepared a severe punishment for them. So, you who are endowed with insight, you who have faith, fear God. God has bestowed on you a reminder from on high. [He has sent you] a Messenger who recites to you God's revelations that make things clear, so that He may lead those who believe and do righteous deeds out of the depths of darkness into the light. God will admit everyone who believes in Him and does righteous deeds into gardens through which running waters flow, where they will abide for ever. God will have granted them a most excellent provision.* (Verses 8–11)

This is a long warning incorporating detailed scenes and images. It is also a profound reminder of God's grace, represented by faith and the light He grants through it. A further reminder is given of His reward in the life to come, which is the best and most generous of all provisions.

To start with, the punishment God metes out to those who defy His orders and do not respond to His messengers is a law He has set in operation: "*Many a community that insolently defied the commandment of their Lord and His messengers We have brought to account in a severe manner and inflicted on them terrible suffering.*" (Verse 8) The verse mentions more details about the way in which they were brought to

account, highlighting its severity and the terrible suffering inflicted on them. This is followed by the final outcome of their actions: "*Thus they tasted the outcome of their own conduct. Yet the end of their conduct was ruin.*" (Verse 9) The image given of this outcome is delayed to the next verse: "*God has prepared a severe punishment for them.*" (Verse 10) All this serves to make the scene longer and provide details of its steps and stages. This is one of the ways the Qur'ān employs to enhance the effects of the message it wants to give.

We need to reflect a little on this warning. We realize that God brought different communities to account, one at a time, whenever they defied His commandments and disobeyed His messengers. We note that this warning is given here in the context of outlining the rulings on divorce. Thus, a link between divorce and this divine law is established. This suggests that the divorce issue is not merely one of couples and families; it is an issue for the entire Muslim community, which is responsible for implementing God's law. To disobey God in this question, or indeed in other aspects of the divine law, or rather the code of living God has given, is an act of defiance which merits punishment, not only for the individuals who commit such disobedience, but also for the community or the country where such defiance takes place. Such defiance means setting up a life system that differs from what God has legislated. The religion of Islam has been bestowed from on high so that it will be obeyed and implemented in a way that regulates life as a whole. Therefore, defying it, even in the area of an individual's personal affairs, exposes the defiant to what earlier communities suffered of God's punishment.

Those communities tasted the results of their own conduct, and the end to which their actions led was utter ruin, which they suffered in this life, before the final reckoning on the Day of Judgement. Cities, peoples and nations tasted such outcomes when they defied God and refused to adopt the code of living He revealed to them. Today, we witness, as did our predecessors, such an outcome being suffered in the form of corruption, loose morality, poverty, drought, injustice and a life of fear that is devoid of peace and security. We see with our own eyes the truth of this warning.

On top of this, there will be grievous suffering that awaits those who defy God's orders and discard the way of life He has laid down. He,

the most truthful of all, says: "*God has prepared a severe punishment for them.*" (Verse 10)

In Volume XVI, we explained in our discussion of *Sūrah* 61, the Ranks, that Islam aims to create a Muslim community distinguished by its special system. It is, therefore, a collective system that conducts all the life affairs of its community. Hence, the community as a whole is responsible for putting it into practice and enforcing its laws. When the community discards the laws and rulings Islam puts in place, it leaves itself exposed to a fate which it is warned about here, just like it befell earlier defiant communities.

The *sūrah* follows the long warning and its detailed images with an address to believers endowed with insight. They are called upon to remain God-fearing: "*So, you who are endowed with insight, you who have faith, fear God. God has bestowed on you a reminder from on high.*" (Verse 10) The *sūrah* gives life to this reminder embodying it in the Prophet (peace be upon him). Thus, God's Messenger in person is the reminder: "*A Messenger who recites to you God's revelations that make things clear.*" (Verse 11)

Here we have a superb example of the Qur'ānic style giving us a profound and true image and that imparts more than one meaning. It first indicates that this reminder, which has been issued to them by God, has been given to them through the person of God's Messenger. It is as if the reminder was given directly to them. Nothing of it was screened by the Prophet. It also means that God's Messenger, in person, is a reminder. His personality has become an embodiment of this reminder, and his actions are a true translation of the Qur'ān. Thus, indeed, was the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him). 'Ā'ishah, his wife, describes him in these words: "His morals and manners were the Qur'ān." The Qur'ān was always in his mind as he faced life, and he himself was the Qur'ān addressing life.

In addition to the blessings of the reminder, and the light and guidance given by God, we also have a promise of admission to heaven where believers will enjoy its everlasting bliss. There is a reminder here making clear that this is the best of all provisions, and that whatever people are given in this present life cannot be compared to it: "*God will have granted them a most excellent provision.*" (Verse 11) It is God who

grants all provisions in the life of this world and in the life to come, but some provisions are better than others. His choice of what is best is the right choice. We see how the point of good provisions is mentioned here again so as to impress on people that the provisions in heaven are immeasurably better than what is provided here. Yet this is in addition to the true promise made earlier of giving good provisions to those who remain God-fearing.

The Creator of All

The *sūrah*'s concluding note refers to the great universe, thus linking the theme of the *sūrah*, its legislation and directives to God's will, power and knowledge that encompass the entire universe:

> *It is God who has created seven heavens and likewise of the earth. His command descends through them all, so that you may learn that God has power over all things, and that God encompasses all things with His knowledge.* (Verse 12)

We do not know to what the term 'seven heavens' really refers, nor are we aware of their sizes and dimensions. Likewise, we do not know what the seven earths are. This earth of ours may be one of them and the others are known to God alone. Yet the term *mithluhunn*, translated here as 'likewise' may not be a reference to number, but to the fact that the earth is made of the same material or qualities as the heavens. Whichever is the case, it is unnecessary to try to apply our own knowledge to Qur'ānic statements of this type. Our knowledge does not extend to everything in the universe so as to enable us to learn what exactly the Qur'ān refers to. To claim such precise knowledge is possible only when man acquires absolutely certain knowledge of the entire universe. While this is impossible, we can still benefit by the Qur'ānic reference to this fact and its psychological effect and its bearing on our understanding of the proper Islamic concept of the universe.

This reference to the creation of the vast universe, "*seven heavens and likewise of the earth,*" is awe inspiring. It presents us with a great image of the Creator's limitless power, the vastness of His kingdom. When

compared to the universe, the entire earth seems a tiny little place. How do we see those living on it, and how do we estimate an event that takes place on it? What value should we give to a little sum of money a man gives his divorced wife in maintenance, or that a woman forgos?

God's command descends in between, or through, these seven heavens and the earth or the seven earths. A part of His command is the sum of these rulings concerning the subject matter of this *sūrah*, i.e. divorce. It is, then, a great issue, even by human standards and our concept of time and place. To defy it is to be in defiance of a command that resounds throughout the heavens and the earths. It is a command that those on high hear of, as do other creatures in the heavens and the earths. Defying it, then, becomes a ghastly offence that no wise believer would even contemplate, and particularly when God's messenger has recited to him God's precise revelations, enlightening him on this matter so as to take him from darkness into light.

This command descends through the heavens and the earth so that it implants in believers' hearts the belief that God has the power to do what He wills. Nothing is beyond Him. He also knows everything throughout His great kingdom. Nothing escapes His knowledge, not even the best guarded secrets of the heart.

This truth is relevant here in two ways: the first is that these rulings on divorce are given by God who knows everything. He has issued them knowing all their situations, circumstances, interests and abilities. Hence, they are better to be followed with diligence, for they are better suited for human life. Secondly, the implementation of these rulings in particular is left to people's consciences. Therefore, realizing the extent of God's knowledge and His awareness of everything, including people's feelings and intentions, ensures that such consciences remain sensitive in an area where nothing is more important than fearing God Almighty.

Thus the *sūrah* concludes on this awe-striking note, which also makes people's minds ready to listen and obey. All praise is due to the Creator of these hearts who knows how to inspire and influence them.

SŪRAH 66

Al-Taḥrīm

(Prohibition)

Prologue

God has willed that Islam should be His final message, and the code of living it outlines should be the one suitable for the rest of human life. Furthermore, the life of those who believe in Islam should be consistent with the law that governs the universe, and Islam should be the faith to guide human life and shape all its activities. Therefore, He made this code of living comprehensive and perfect, catering for all human abilities and potentials. At the same time, this code elevates such abilities and potentials to the level suited for the creature God has placed in charge of the earth, honouring him above many of His other creatures, and blowing into him of His own spirit. Consistent with this will of His, God has made Islam naturally forward-looking. It enables life to grow while at the same time elevating it to the highest standard of purity. It does not stop any creative aspect or suppress a useful potential. On the contrary, it awakens and enhances these while ensuring a proper balance between forward movement and rising to a higher horizon. It is this which prepares the human spirit in this life for the superior happiness and bliss of the life to come, and the human mortal for a life everlasting.

God has also willed that the Messenger who delivers this final message should be a man who reflects the faith, with all its distinctive

characteristics and its special nature. Thus, as he goes through life, the Prophet becomes a true and practical translation of this faith, its nature and direction. He is an ordinary human being whose human abilities have attained a high standard: physically strong, with perfect constitution, sound senses, alert, able to perfectly feel all there is to feel. At the same time, he is full of emotion, naturally alert and sensitive, appreciates beauty, and is receptive and responsive. Moreover, he is of great intelligence, broad-minded, strong-willed, and he controls his feelings and reactions. Above all this, he is the Prophet whose soul reflects pure light, able to undertake the night journey from Makkah to Jerusalem and his subsequent ascendance to heaven. He is the one who is addressed from on high, sees the light of his Lord, and whose nature is in touch with the nature of everything in the universe: small and large stones greet him, the branches of trees yearn for contact with him, and Uḥud, the mountain, shakes at his presence. All these powers and potentials are balanced within his personality in such a way as to reflect the balance of the faith he has been chosen to present to humanity.

God has made the Prophet's life, its private and public aspects, an open book for the benefit of his followers and humanity at large. They can read in it all aspects of the Islamic faith and its practical implementation. Hence, there is nothing in it that is secret or limited to a closed circle. Indeed, many of its aspects are stated in the Qur'ān, revealing things that for an ordinary person are normally kept private. Indeed, even those aspects of human weakness, which are beyond our control, are left open for all to see. We almost see the wisdom behind so revealing such aspects of the Prophet's life to mankind. Nothing in his person or in his life belongs exclusively to him. He and all aspects of his life belong to his message. Why should, then, any aspect of his life be hidden? His life is the Islamic faith, something that is both close to us and easy to implement. The Prophet is assigned the task of presenting it in practice in his own life, just as he presents it by word and directive. This is the role assigned to him.

His Companions – may God be pleased with them and reward them well – conveyed to us all the details of his life. Nothing, whether of little or great importance in his daily life, is left unrecorded. It was part of God's will to have such a detailed record of His Messenger's life, or

rather to have a detailed record of Islam as lived by the Prophet. What his Companions reported is added to what the Qur'ān records of the Prophet's life and both form an everlasting record of this noble life, which benefits all humanity.

The Prophet's Wives

In its opening section, this *sūrah* presents an episode of life in the Prophet's home, showing some of the reactions and responses between some of his wives, and between them and himself. It also shows how these reactions and responses were reflected in the life of the Muslim community as a whole. This is followed by directives given to the community on the basis of what took place in the Prophet's homes, between his wives.

The time when these events took place is not precise, but reference to the various reports detailing them confirm that they definitely occurred after the Prophet's marriage to Zaynab bint Jaḥsh.

It may also be useful to give here a summary of the Prophet's marriages and his home life at that time. This will enable us to visualize the events referred to in the *sūrah*. This brief outline is based on *Jawāmi' al-Sīrah* by Ibn Ḥazm and the Prophet's biography by Ibn Hishām. We will also add some brief comments as appropriate.

The Prophet's first wife was Khadījah bint Khuwaylid. He was 25, or perhaps 23,[1] when he married her. She was 40 or even older.[2] She died three years before the Prophet's migration to Madīnah. He did not marry another wife during her lifetime, and by then he was over 50 years of age.

After Khadījah's death, the Prophet married Sawdah bint Zima'h. There are no reports to suggest that she was either pretty or young. She was a widow of al-Sakrān ibn 'Amr ibn 'Abd Shams. Her husband

1. Other figures of the Prophet's age are mentioned in different reports: the lowest year of age is 21 and the highest is 30. – Editor's note.

2. Khadījah is commonly thought to have been 40 at the time of her marriage to the Prophet. This is highly unlikely as she gave the Prophet six children over a period of ten years. Other reports suggest that she was 25, 28, 30, 35 and even 45 years of age. One of the lower figures is more likely. – Editor's note.

was one of the early Muslims, and he was among the first migrants to Abyssinia. When he died, the Prophet married her.

He then married 'Ā'ishah bint Abū Bakr. She apparently was young, and he did not hold his wedding with her until he had settled in Madīnah. She was the only virgin he married, and she was the one he loved most. It is said that she was only nine years of age at the time of her marriage.[3] By the time he passed away, she had been with him nine years and five months.

The Prophet then married Ḥafṣah bint 'Umar, just over two years after settling in Madīnah. She had been married before. Her father had offered her in marriage to Abū Bakr and to 'Uthmān, but they both declined. The Prophet had promised her father something better for her so he married her himself.

He then married Zaynab bint Khuzaymah. Her first husband, 'Ubaydah ibn al-Ḥārith ibn 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib, was killed at the Battle of Badr. Zaynab died during the Prophet's lifetime. It is also reported that her first husband was 'Abdullāh ibn Jaḥsh who fell a martyr at the Battle of Uḥud. Perhaps this report is more accurate.

The Prophet also married Umm Salamah. Her first husband, Abū Salamah, was wounded at the Battle of Uḥud, and his wound did not heal until he died. The Prophet then married her, looking after her children by her first husband.

Zaynab bint Jaḥsh was his next wife. He himself had given her in marriage to Zayd ibn Ḥārithah, his former servant whom he had adopted as a son, but marital life between her and Zayd was fraught with difficulties. So, he divorced her. We related their story when discussing verses 36–40 of *Sūrah* 33, The Confederates, in Volume XIV.[4] She was pretty. Indeed, she was the one 'Ā'ishah felt most able to compete with because she was the Prophet's cousin, born to his paternal aunt, and because of her beauty.

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3. This is again highly unlikely. She is mentioned among the early Muslims, which suggests that she was old enough to accept the new faith nine years before her marriage. Different reports of her reaction to events and statements suggest that she was perhaps twice this age at the time of her marriage. – Editor's note.

4. Sayyid Quṭb (2006), *In the Shade of the Qur'ān*, Vol. XIV, Leicester, Islamic Foundation, pp. 82–91.

Juwayriyyah bint al-Ḥārith was the next wife to be taken by the Prophet. This was in the middle of the sixth year of the Islamic calendar. Ibn Isḥāq attributes the following report to 'Ā'ishah: "When the Prophet distributed the women taken slaves after the Expedition of al-Muṣṭalaq, Juwayriyyah fell to Thābit ibn Qays ibn Shammās or his cousin. She made an agreement with him to buy her own freedom. She was very pretty. Anyone who saw her felt very attracted. She went to the Prophet seeking his help in paying what she owed for her freedom. When I saw her at my doorstep, I hated her, realizing that the Prophet would see of her beauty what I saw. She entered his room and said to him: 'Messenger of God. I am Juwayriyyah bint al-Ḥārith. My father is the chief of his tribe. You are not unaware of the trouble that has befallen me. I am here to seek your help in paying for my freedom after I had made an agreement to so buy myself.' He said to her: 'What about something better?' She asked him: 'What is that, Messenger of God?' He said: 'I will pay for your freedom and marry you.' She said: 'I accept.' He said: 'It is a deal.'"

The Prophet married Umm Ḥabībah bint Abū Sufyān after the al-Ḥudaybiyah Peace Treaty. She had migrated to Abyssinia, but her husband, 'Ubaydullāh ibn Jaḥsh, converted to Christianity there and left her. The Prophet proposed marriage to her. It was King Negus who officiated at the marriage and paid her dowry on behalf of the Prophet.[5] She then returned to Madīnah.

Following the Battle of Khaybar, the Prophet married Ṣafiyyah bint Ḥuyayy ibn Akhṭab. Her father was the chief of the Jewish tribe, al-Naḍīr. She had been married to Kinānah ibn Abī al-Ḥuqayq, a Jewish leader. Ibn Isḥāq reports that "she was brought to him with another woman who had fallen prisoner. Bilāl walked them through the battlefield passing a number of Jews who had been slain. The other woman cried out loud as they passed by, throwing dust over her own head. The Prophet said: 'Take this devil woman away from me.' He

5. The Prophet sent a messenger to Negus to arrange this marriage on his behalf, when he heard of Umm Ḥabībah's plight after she had lost her husband. This was some time before al-Ḥudaybiyah's peace treaty. However, she only arrived in Madīnah after that event. – Editor's note.

ordered that Ṣafiyyah be kept behind him, throwing his robe over her. His Companions thereby realized that he would take her himself. The Prophet is reported to have said to Bilāl: 'Are you devoid of compassion? How can you walk two women through the grounds where their menfolk have been killed?'"

Maymūnah bint al-Ḥārith ibn Ḥazn was the last of the Prophet's wives. She was the maternal aunt of Khālid ibn al-Walīd and 'Abdullāh ibn 'Abbās. Before marrying the Prophet she was married to Abū Ruhm ibn 'Abd al-'Uzzā, or perhaps Ḥuwayṭib ibn 'Abd al-'Uzzā.

Thus, we see the special reasons that made it necessary for the Prophet to marry each of his wives. Apart from Zaynab bint Jaḥsh and Juwayriyyah bint al-Ḥārith, none were young or particularly attractive to men.[6] 'Ā'ishah was the one he loved most. Even in the case of those wives who were young and beautiful, there were psychological and humanitarian factors involved in their marriages. These increased their attraction. I do not deny or disregard the physical attraction, or beauty 'Ā'ishah felt the moment she saw Juwayriyyah, while Zaynab's beauty was also known to all. There is no need to deny that such human elements were a part of the Prophet's life. These cannot, however, form the basis for accusations levelled by the Prophet's enemies and which were denied by his followers. He was chosen as a human being, but with superior qualities and characteristics. Different as they were, his motives for whatever he did in his life, including his marriages, matched his superior qualities. In his home, he lived with his wives as a human being entrusted with the delivery of God's message. Indeed, God commanded him to declare the fact: "*Say, 'Limitless in His glory is my Lord. Surely I am only a man and a Messenger.'*" (17: 93)

He enjoyed life with his wives, as so did they. 'Ā'ishah states: "When the Prophet was alone with his wives, he was the most lenient and generous of people, always smiling and laughing." [Related by al-Suyūṭī and Ibn 'Asākir.] Yet this applied to what he himself could offer out of his character, compassion, manners and behaviour. As for their material life, it was mostly a life of poverty, even after the Muslim community

6. We should perhaps add Ṣafiyyah bint Ḥuyayy as well, who was also young at the time the Prophet married her. – Editor's note.

achieved several victories and made plentiful gains. In commenting on *Sūrah* 33, The Confederates, we discussed the crisis that took place in the Prophet's home when his wives asked for more housekeeping money.[7] The problem ended with a choice put to them in the following terms: "*Prophet! Say to your wives: 'If you desire the life of this world and its charms, I shall provide for you and release you in a becoming manner; but if you desire God and His Messenger and the life of the hereafter, know that God has readied great rewards for those of you who do good.'*" (33: 28–29) They all chose God, His Messenger and the life of the hereafter.

Nevertheless, life in the Prophet's home was not such as to stifle normal human feelings and jealousies in his wives' minds. Sometimes they had their disagreements, just like those that may occur among women in similar circumstances. We have seen how the moment 'Ā'ishah saw Juwayriyyah, she hoped that the Prophet would not see her because she was certain he would appreciate her beauty. She was right. 'Ā'ishah herself mentions a situation involving her and Ṣafiyyah: "I said to the Prophet: 'It is enough that Ṣafiyyah is so and so,' [meaning, she was short]. He said to me: 'You have said a word which could colour an entire sea.'" [Related by Abū Dāwūd.] She also reports that when the verses giving the Prophet's wives the choice referred to above, she was the first to be asked, and she chose to stay with the Prophet. She also requested that he not tell his other wives of her choice should any of them so ask. He said to her: "God has not sent me to make things hard for people. He sent me as a teacher who makes things easier. I will tell anyone of them about your choice should any care to ask." [Related by Muslim.]

These reports given by 'Ā'ishah about herself, reflecting her truthfulness and her shining Islamic education, are only examples of many others reflecting the normal way ordinary people behave in such a situation. They also show how the Prophet delivered his message through good example, cultivating the better characteristics of his household members, just as he delivered it by good example within his community.

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7. This discussion is included in Volume XIV, pp. 61–66.

Al-Taḥrīm (Prohibition)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

Prophet, why do you prohibit yourself something that God has made lawful to you in your desire to please your wives? God is much-forgiving, ever merciful. (1)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّبِيُّ لِمَ تُحَرِّمُ مَآ أَحَلَّ ٱللَّهُ لَكَ تَبۡتَغِي مَرۡضَاتَ أَزۡوَٰجِكَۚ وَٱللَّهُ غَفُورٞ رَّحِيمٞ ١

God has already ordained for you [believers] a way to release you from such oaths. God is your Lord Supreme. He alone is the All-Knowing, the Wise. (2)

قَدۡ فَرَضَ ٱللَّهُ لَكُمۡ تَحِلَّةَ أَيۡمَٰنِكُمۡۚ وَٱللَّهُ مَوۡلَىٰكُمۡۖ وَهُوَ ٱلۡعَلِيمُ ٱلۡحَكِيمُ ٢

The Prophet told something in confidence to one of his wives. When she divulged it, and God made this known to him, he spoke of a part of it and passed over a part. When he thus let her know of that, she asked, 'Who has told you this?' He said: 'The All-Knowing, the All-Aware told me.' (3)

وَإِذۡ أَسَرَّ ٱلنَّبِيُّ إِلَىٰ بَعۡضِ أَزۡوَٰجِهِۦ حَدِيثٗا فَلَمَّا نَبَّأَتۡ بِهِۦ وَأَظۡهَرَهُ ٱللَّهُ عَلَيۡهِ عَرَّفَ بَعۡضَهُۥ وَأَعۡرَضَ عَنۢ بَعۡضٖۖ فَلَمَّا نَبَّأَهَا بِهِۦ قَالَتۡ مَنۡ أَنۢبَأَكَ هَٰذَاۖ قَالَ نَبَّأَنِيَ ٱلۡعَلِيمُ ٱلۡخَبِيرُ ٣

Would that you two turn to God in repentance, for your hearts have swerved! But if you support each other against him, know that God is his protector, and that, therefore, Gabriel, all righteous believers and the angels will stand behind him. (4)

إِن تَتُوبَآ إِلَى ٱللَّهِ فَقَدۡ صَغَتۡ قُلُوبُكُمَاۖ وَإِن تَظَٰهَرَا عَلَيۡهِ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ هُوَ مَوۡلَىٰهُ وَجِبۡرِيلُ وَصَٰلِحُ ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَۖ وَٱلۡمَلَٰٓئِكَةُ بَعۡدَ ذَٰلِكَ ظَهِيرٌ ٤

Were he to divorce you, his Lord may well give him in your stead spouses better than you: women who surrender themselves to God, true believers, devout, penitent, who worship in humility and reflect thoughtfully, be they women previously married or virgins. (5)

عَسَىٰ رَبُّهُۥٓ إِن طَلَّقَكُنَّ أَن يُبْدِلَهُۥٓ
أَزْوَٰجًا خَيْرًا مِّنكُنَّ مُسْلِمَٰتٍ مُّؤْمِنَٰتٍ
قَٰنِتَٰتٍ تَٰٓئِبَٰتٍ عَٰبِدَٰتٍ سَٰٓئِحَٰتٍ
ثَيِّبَٰتٍ وَأَبْكَارًا ٥

Believers! Guard yourselves and your families against a fire fuelled by people and stones, over which are appointed angels, stern and mighty, who never disobey God in whatever He commands them and always do what they are bidden to do. (6)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ قُوٓا۟ أَنفُسَكُمْ
وَأَهْلِيكُمْ نَارًا وَقُودُهَا ٱلنَّاسُ وَٱلْحِجَارَةُ
عَلَيْهَا مَلَٰٓئِكَةٌ غِلَاظٌ شِدَادٌ لَّا يَعْصُونَ
ٱللَّهَ مَآ أَمَرَهُمْ وَيَفْعَلُونَ مَا يُؤْمَرُونَ ٦

Unbelievers! Make no excuses today. You will only be requited for what you used to do. (7)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ لَا تَعْتَذِرُوا۟ ٱلْيَوْمَ
إِنَّمَا تُجْزَوْنَ مَا كُنتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ ٧

Believers! Turn to God in sincere repentance. It may well be that your Lord will efface your bad deeds and admit you into gardens through which running waters flow, on a day when God will not disgrace the Prophet or those who believed with him. Their light will spread out before them, and on their right. They will say: 'Our Lord! Perfect our light for us and forgive us. You certainly have power over all things.' (8)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ تُوبُوٓا۟ إِلَى ٱللَّهِ تَوْبَةً
نَّصُوحًا عَسَىٰ رَبُّكُمْ أَن يُكَفِّرَ عَنكُمْ
سَيِّـَٔاتِكُمْ وَيُدْخِلَكُمْ جَنَّٰتٍ تَجْرِى
مِن تَحْتِهَا ٱلْأَنْهَٰرُ يَوْمَ لَا يُخْزِى ٱللَّهُ
ٱلنَّبِىَّ وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ مَعَهُۥ ۖ نُورُهُمْ
يَسْعَىٰ بَيْنَ أَيْدِيهِمْ وَبِأَيْمَٰنِهِمْ يَقُولُونَ
رَبَّنَآ أَتْمِمْ لَنَا نُورَنَا وَٱغْفِرْ لَنَآ ۖ إِنَّكَ
عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَىْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ٨

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّبِيُّ جَٰهِدِ ٱلْكُفَّارَ
وَٱلْمُنَٰفِقِينَ وَٱغْلُظْ عَلَيْهِمْ ۚ وَمَأْوَىٰهُمْ
جَهَنَّمُ ۖ وَبِئْسَ ٱلْمَصِيرُ ﴿٩﴾

Prophet, strive hard against the unbelievers and the hypocrites, and press hard on them. Their ultimate abode is hell, and how vile a journey's end. (9)

ضَرَبَ ٱللَّهُ مَثَلًا لِّلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟
ٱمْرَأَتَ نُوحٍ وَٱمْرَأَتَ لُوطٍ ۖ كَانَتَا
تَحْتَ عَبْدَيْنِ مِنْ عِبَادِنَا صَٰلِحَيْنِ
فَخَانَتَاهُمَا فَلَمْ يُغْنِيَا عَنْهُمَا مِنَ
ٱللَّهِ شَيْـًٔا وَقِيلَ ٱدْخُلَا ٱلنَّارَ مَعَ
ٱلدَّٰخِلِينَ ﴿١٠﴾

God has given examples of unbelievers: Noah's wife and Lot's wife. They were married to two of Our righteous servants but betrayed them. Their husbands could be of no avail to them against God. They were told: 'Enter both of you the fire with all those who will enter it.' (10)

وَضَرَبَ ٱللَّهُ مَثَلًا لِّلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟
ٱمْرَأَتَ فِرْعَوْنَ إِذْ قَالَتْ رَبِّ ٱبْنِ لِى
عِندَكَ بَيْتًا فِى ٱلْجَنَّةِ وَنَجِّنِى مِن
فِرْعَوْنَ وَعَمَلِهِۦ وَنَجِّنِى مِنَ ٱلْقَوْمِ
ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ﴿١١﴾

God has also given examples of believers: Pharaoh's wife, who said: 'My Lord! Build me a mansion in heaven near You, and save me from Pharaoh and his doings, and save me from the wrongdoing folk.' (11)

وَمَرْيَمَ ٱبْنَتَ عِمْرَٰنَ ٱلَّتِىٓ أَحْصَنَتْ
فَرْجَهَا فَنَفَخْنَا فِيهِ مِن رُّوحِنَا
وَصَدَّقَتْ بِكَلِمَٰتِ رَبِّهَا وَكُتُبِهِۦ
وَكَانَتْ مِنَ ٱلْقَٰنِتِينَ ﴿١٢﴾

And Mary, the daughter of 'Imrān, who guarded her chastity; and We breathed of Our spirit into her. She accepted the truth of her Lord's words and His revealed books. She was truly devout. (12)

The Event

The opening section of the *sūrah* speaks of an event in the lives of the Prophet and his wives. Although there are a number of reports giving different versions of what actually took place, we will leave these for now and return to them a little later. Based on this incident and the directives issued in connection with it, particularly the request that the two conspirators among the Prophet's wives repent, the *sūrah* also calls on believers to repent of their sins and requires that heads of families ensure their families are well brought up. They are specifically urged to protect themselves and their families from hell. A direct image of hell is also included here. The *sūrah* then concludes by citing various examples. Noah's and Lot's wives are shown as examples of unfaith in a house emanating belief, while Pharaoh's wife is depicted as someone holding to right faith while living in a house full of unbelievers. Mary is also shown as a pure woman who received a breath of God's spirit and believed in God's words and scriptures.

> *Prophet, why do you prohibit yourself something that God has made lawful to you in your desire to please your wives? God is much-forgiving, ever merciful. God has already ordained for you [believers] a way to release you from such oaths. God is your Lord Supreme. He alone is the All-Knowing, the Wise. The Prophet told something in confidence to one of his wives. When she divulged it, and God made this known to him, he spoke of a part of it and passed over a part. When he thus let her know of that, she asked, 'Who has told you this?' He said: 'The All-Knowing, the All-Aware told me.' Would that you two turn to God in repentance, for your hearts have swerved! But if you support each other against him, know that God is his protector, and that, therefore, Gabriel, all righteous believers and the angels will stand behind him. Were he to divorce you, his Lord may well give him in your stead spouses better than you: women who surrender themselves to God, true believers, devout, penitent, who worship in humility and reflect thoughtfully, be they women previously married or virgins.* (Verses 1–5)

The Reports

There are several reports about the event in question, one of which is related by al-Bukhārī, which means that it is authentic. On 'Ā'ishah's authority, al-Bukhārī relates: "The Prophet used to have a honey drink at Zaynab bint Jaḥsh's home and then stay for some time with her. Ḥafṣah and I secretly agreed that when he came to either of us we would say to him: 'You have eaten *Maghāfir*[8]; I can smell it.' When this occurred, he said: 'No. I only had a honey drink at Zaynab's. I will not do it again, and I have made an oath to this effect. Do not tell anyone of this.' This is what he prohibited himself, even though it was permissible for him to have."

It seems that either 'Ā'ishah or Ḥafṣah told her co-conspirator of the Prophet's decision to no longer take this honey drink. God then informed him of the same. He went back to her and mentioned some of what went on between the two of them, but without recounting it all in order not to embarrass her. He only touched upon the subject so that she realized that he was aware of it all. Surprised, she asked him: 'Who told you all this?' It might have occurred to her that his other wife was the one to tell him. He, however, said to her: '*The All-Knowing, the All-Aware told me.*' (Verse 3) His information, then, was given by the One who knows it all, which, in turn, implies that the Prophet was also aware of it *in toto*, not merely what he mentioned to her.

This incident angered the Prophet, exposing as it did that intrigue was going on in his home. He, therefore, swore that he would not touch any of his wives for a full month. People in the Muslim community also heard that the Prophet was thinking of divorcing his wives. This *sūrah* was then revealed and the Prophet's anger subsided. Subsequently, he resumed his life with his wives. We will presently mention how this happened, but we will first give a different version of the incident.

This second version is related by al-Nasā'ī on Anas's authority: "The Prophet had a bondswoman with whom he had sex. His wives, 'Ā'ishah and Ḥafṣah, put pressure to bear on him until he prohibited himself from doing so. God revealed the verses starting with *"Prophet, why do you*

8. *Maghāfir* is a glue-like type of food with a sweet taste and bad smell.

prohibit yourself something that God has made lawful to you in your desire to please your wives?" (Verse 1) Another report given by Ibn Jarīr and Ibn Isḥāq mentions that the Prophet had sex with Maria, the mother of his son Ibrahīm, in Ḥafṣah's home. Ḥafṣah was very angry, considering this to be an insult against her person. The Prophet promised her he would banish Maria from him, swearing to this, and he asked Ḥafṣah to keep this a secret, but she told 'Ā'ishah.

Either one of these two incidents may have taken place. However, the second report involving Maria may be closer to what we can understand from the text of the *sūrah* and the consequences that led to the Prophet being so angry that he even considered divorcing his wives. Taken together, this suggests that the matter was very sensitive and involved. The first report concerning the Prophet's favourite honey drink is more authentic with regard to its transmission. While it is not as serious as the second incidence implies, it might have led to such serious consequences if we take into account the high moral standards prevailing in the Prophet's home. Regardless though of what actually did happen, we should place our trust in God for He knows the truth of it all.

The Outcome

What, then, were the effects of this incident and the Prophet's decision to stay away from his wives for a month? This is best described in a *ḥadīth* related by Imām Aḥmad in *Al-Musnad,* which quotes 'Abdullāh ibn 'Abbās:

> I was keen to ask 'Umar about the Prophet's two wives in reference to whom God says in the Qur'ān: '*Would that you two turn to God in repentance, for your hearts have swerved.*' When 'Umar went on pilgrimage, I went with him. As we were travelling, he moved from the rest and I went with him, carrying a water container. He relieved himself and came back to me. I poured water for him to do his ablution. I then asked him: 'Which two of the Prophet's wives are referred to in God's statement, '*Would that you two turn to God in repentance, for your hearts have swerved*'?' He said: 'I wonder at you, Ibn 'Abbās!' [Al-Zuhrī comments here that 'Umar disliked

being asked about this, but he did not withhold the information.] 'Umar said: 'They were 'Ā'ishah and Ḥafṣah.' He then told me the story.

We, the Quraysh, used to have complete authority over our wives. When we settled in Madīnah, however, we found its people more submissive to their wives. Our women started to learn from their women. I used to live in Umayyah ibn Zayd's home in the highlands. One day, I was angry with my wife, as she objected to something I said. I disliked the fact that she should object to me. She said: 'Why are you so surprised that I should object? God's Messenger's own wives may object to something he says, and any of them may not speak to him the whole day, until night time.' I, therefore, went straight to Ḥafṣah[9] and asked her: 'Do you sometimes object to what the Prophet says?' She confirmed that she did. I asked: 'Would any of you refrain from speaking to him throughout the day, until nightfall?' She again answered in the affirmative. I said: 'Ill-advised and a loser indeed is any of you who does that! Do you not consider that any of you might incur God's anger as a result of His Messenger being angry, and then you end in ruin? Do not object to God's Messenger in anything he says, and do not ask anything from him. Take from me instead whatever you want. Do not be deluded by the fact that your friend [meaning 'Ā'ishah] is more pretty and is loved best by the Prophet.'

I had a neighbour from the Anṣār, with whom I took turns in going down to see the Prophet. He would go one day and I the next day. Each of us would inform the other of any new Qur'ānic revelations and of any events or developments. At the time, we were aware that the Ghassān[10] were preparing to invade us. My neighbour went to the Prophet one day and then came to me in the evening, knocking on my door. He called out and I went to see him. He said: 'A very serious matter took place.' I asked whether the Ghassān army was approaching. He said: 'No, something more serious than

9. Ḥafṣah was 'Umar's daughter, married to the Prophet. – Editor's note.

10. The Ghassān was a major Arab tribe living in southern Syria and Palestine, as part of the Byzantine Empire. – Editor's note.

that. The Prophet has divorced his wives.' I said: 'Ill-advised and lost is Ḥafṣah! I thought that this might happen.'

In the morning, after I had prayed *Fajr*, I put on my clothes and went to Ḥafṣah. I found her crying. I asked her whether the Prophet had divorced his wives. She said: 'I do not know. He has shut himself in this room close by.' I went there and found a black servant. I said to him: 'Seek permission for 'Umar to enter.' He went in and came back, and said: 'I mentioned you to him but he did not reply.' I went away, and I found close to the pulpit in the mosque a few men sitting down, some of whom were in tears. I sat there for a short while and I was then overcome by my own grief. I went back to the servant and told him to seek permission for me to enter. He again went in and told me as he came out that he mentioned my name but the Prophet remained silent. Once more I went to sit near the pulpit until I was overcome by my feelings. I went a third time to the servant and told him to seek permission for me to see the Prophet. Yet he again told me when he came out that he mentioned my name but the Prophet did not reply. I went away, but soon the servant called me. He said: 'You can go in. He has given you permission.' As I went in, I greeted the Prophet. I found him sitting on a straw mat which had left its mark on his side. I asked him whether he had divorced his wives. He lifted his head and said: 'No.' I said: 'God is Supreme.'

I then said: 'Messenger of God. If you could but see us, the Quraysh, when we used to have complete authority over our wives. When we settled in Madīnah, however, we found its people more submissive to their wives. Our women started to learn from their women. I used to live in Umayyah ibn Zayd's home in the highlands. One day, I was angry with my wife, as she objected to something I said. I disliked the fact that she should object to me'. She said: 'Why are you so surprised that I should object? God's Messenger's own wives may object to something he says, and any of them may not speak to him the whole day, until night time.' I then said to Ḥafṣah: 'Ill-advised and a loser indeed is any of you who does that! Do you not consider that any of you might incur God's anger as a result of His Messenger being angry with you, and

so end in ruin?' The Prophet smiled as I said this. I then told him that I said to my daughter that she should not to be deluded by the fact that her friend [meaning 'Ā'ishah] was prettier and loved the best by the Prophet. The Prophet smiled again. I asked whether I could sit down with him and he invited me to so sit.

As I lifted my head, looking around his home, I found absolutely nothing of note, apart from his dignified presence. I said: 'Messenger of God. Pray to God to give your community abundance of things. He has given abundance to the Persians and the Byzantines while they do not worship God.' He sat up and said to me: 'Are you in doubt, Ibn al-Khattab? These are people who have been given their good shares in this present life.' I said: 'Please pray to God to forgive me.' The Prophet had vowed not to come near his wives for a month, because he was so aggrieved by them. Because of this, God took issue with him. [This report is related by al-Bukhārī, Muslim, al-Tirmidhī and al-Nasā'ī on al-Zuhrī's authority, with different chains of transmission.]

The Qur'ānic Discussion

Such is the reporting of the incident in historical sources. We will now look at its treatment in the Qur'ān. The *sūrah* begins with a mild reproach by God to His Messenger:

> *Prophet, why do you prohibit yourself something that God has made lawful to you in your desire to please your wives? God is much-forgiving, ever merciful. God has already ordained for you [believers] a way to release you from such oaths. God is your Lord Supreme. He alone is the All-Knowing, the Wise.* (Verses 1–2)

The reproach is mild but effective. It is not proper for a believer to prohibit himself something that God has made lawful. The Prophet had not imposed a legal prohibition on himself with regard to the honey drink he liked or to Maria. He only decided to refrain from enjoying either. This gentle reproach makes it clear that it is not right to deliberately deprive oneself of what God has made lawful in order to

appease someone else. The comment at the end of the verse is: '*God is much-forgiving, ever merciful.*' This suggests that such deliberate action would require questioning unless it was overlooked by an act of God's forgiveness and grace.

As for the oath that the Qur'ānic text suggests the Prophet made, God stated a way for him to release himself from it. This means that an oath that establishes a situation other than what is best should be atoned for so as to release oneself from it and then take up the better option. "*God is your Lord Supreme.*" (Verse 2) He helps you to overcome your weaknesses and to cope with what may be hard for you. Hence, he has ordained for you a way out of your oaths so as to ensure that you do not incur unnecessary hardship. "*He alone is the All-Knowing, the Wise.*" (Verse 2) He legislates for you on the basis of His absolute knowledge and perfect wisdom. He only commands you to do what is within your power and what is best suited for you. Therefore, do not prohibit yourselves anything other than what He has forbidden, and continue to make lawful only what He has made lawful. It is clear that the comment here fits perfectly with the directive already stated.

The *sūrah* then refers to what the Prophet said to one of his wives, but mentions neither its subject matter nor its details. None of this is important. What is important, however, is what it signified and the knock-on effects it generated: "*The Prophet told something in confidence to one of his wives.*" (Verse 3) What we are looking at here is something unique in human history. We are looking at a period when there was direct contact between heaven and ordinary people. Here is a direct, public and detailed intervention by heaven in human affairs. God informs the Prophet of a conversation between two of his wives concerning something he had told one of them in confidence. When the Prophet mentioned this to the wife who had divulged it, he only hinted at a certain aspect of it, rather than giving her a detailed account. At the same time, he also informed her of the source of his information: it was the One solid source that could not be mistaken: "*When she divulged it, and God made this known to him, he spoke of a part of it and passed over a part. When he thus let her know of that, she asked, 'Who has told you this?' He said: 'The All-Knowing, the All-Aware told me.'*" (Verse 3)

The choice of God's attributes of perfect knowledge and complete awareness of everything particularly suit the conspiratory situation under discussion. Thus, the one who asked the question is reminded of that which she might have forgotten or overlooked. We are all so reminded whenever we read the Qur'ān.

A change of style then follows. The *sūrah* is no longer reporting an incident; it is now addressing the two women involved, as if the matter is taking place at this very moment: "*Would that you two turn to God in repentance, for your hearts have swerved! But if you support each other against him, know that God is his protector, and that, therefore, Gabriel, all righteous believers and the angels will stand behind him.*" (Verse 4) They are, thus, invited to turn to God in repentance after their hearts had swerved from rightful action.

We so realize that the incident had such a profound effect on the Prophet as to require the statement that he is given full protection by God. Furthermore, Gabriel, the believers and all angels stand ready to give him their full support. The Prophet is thus reassured and comforted after this serious breach of confidence. Indeed, the whole situation must have been considered as very serious, implying far-reaching consequences for it to have necessitated such assurances. We can appreciate this for ourselves from the reports mentioned earlier, particularly the answer given by the Anṣārī man when 'Umar asked him about whether the Ghassān army was approaching. In fact his answer states that the matter was even more serious than that threat. Ghassān was an autonomous region in the tutelage of the Byzantine Empire, bordering the Arabian Peninsula. An attack by Ghassān on the Muslim community would have been very serious, yet the other matter was felt by Muslims to be even far more serious and far-reaching. They felt that the Prophet's own comfort and the maintenance of serenity and peace in his noble home were more important than anything else. This, then, gives us a clear indication of how the Muslim community viewed these developments, a view in line with how heaven treated it. It is, then, a correct view.

The next verse provides similar import. It details the qualities of the women whom God may give to His Messenger, should he divorce his current wives. This is addressed to all his wives by way of an implicit threat: "*Were he to divorce you, his Lord may well give him in your stead*

spouses better than you: women who surrender themselves to God, true believers, devout, penitent, who worship in humility and reflect thoughtfully, be they women previously married or virgins." (Verse 5) They are, thus, indirectly called upon to adopt these qualities. The first quality is full submission to God and the fulfilment of all religious obligations. Next, is complete faith that leads to surrendering oneself to God, which is the literal meaning of the Arabic word *islam*. Devotion, the third quality, means conscious obedience of God. The Prophet's wives should also be penitent, which means that they should regret any slip into sin and follow this by turning to do God's bidding. To worship in humility is another quality they should possess. It is the means by which to communicate with God and express our submission to Him. Thoughtful reflection is how we have translated the quality the *sūrah* refers to by the Arabic word *sā'iḥāt*, which literally means 'wandering, contemplating'. What it means here is that they always reflect on God's creation and contemplate the great universe He has created. Having all these qualities, these new wives would be either virgins or previously married, in the same way as the Prophet married those wives already with him.

This warning was apparently necessary because of the telling effect their conspiracy had on the Prophet, incurring his anger. He was never given to anger, but the matter was clearly serious. The Prophet felt comforted and reassured when these verses were revealed, addressing him personally as also members of his household. Thereafter, the atmosphere in his blessed home regained its serenity as a direct result of God's statements. This was an honour given to the Prophet and his household, given their important role in the solid implementation of God's code for human life.

We have thus seen a picture of the home life of the man who was entrusted with establishing a nation and a state on hitherto unknown lines. This nation was to be entrusted with the fulfilment of divine faith in its final form. It was to be the practical establishment of a devout society that sets the example for future generations. We see also a picture of a man of exceptional greatness and nobility. Yet, he lived his humanity just as he fulfilled the tasks of his prophethood; the two were intertwined. It was God's will that he should be a human Messenger delivering His last message to mankind, outlining a perfect code for all humanity.

It is a perfect message delivered by a perfect Messenger. One aspect of its perfection is that its every adherent remains a human being: none of his abilities or talents are suppressed or prevented from developing and flourishing. At the same time, it cultivates and educates him so as to attain the highest standard within his power.

Thus has been the method of Islam with those who understood it well and who have moulded their lives on the basis of its teachings. They became living examples of Islam. The Prophet's practical life, with all that it involved of human experience, endeavours, strengths and weaknesses, was intertwined with the divine message. As we see in the case of those who were closest to him and his own family, his life was the practical example of how to live Islam. It set the model for those who wish to learn an easy and practical way of implementing God's message. It also steered away from theoretical assumptions that have no practical effect.

God's purpose was thus fulfilled: the final message to mankind was revealed in full, the Messenger who could receive it and give it its practical form was chosen, and his life was left as an open book for all, studied and reviewed by one generation after another.

A Believer's Responsibility

Now the *sūrah* addresses the believers enjoining them to fulfil their family duties, providing good education, admonition and reminders so that they protect themselves and their families from hell. It provides an image of the fire and how the unbelievers stand before it. In line with the call to those involved in the earlier event to turn to God in repentance, the same call is made to the believers, adding an image of heaven which awaits those who repent of their sins. This second section of the *sūrah* concludes with a call on the Prophet to strive hard against the unbelievers and the hypocrites:

> *Believers! Guard yourselves and your families against a fire fuelled by people and stones, over which are appointed angels, stern and mighty, who never disobey God in whatever He commands them and always do what they are bidden to do. Unbelievers! Make no excuses today. You*

will only be requited for what you used to do. Believers! Turn to God in sincere repentance. It may well be that your Lord will efface your bad deeds and admit you into gardens through which running waters flow, on a day when God will not disgrace the Prophet or those who believed with him. Their light will spread out before them, and on their right. They will say: 'Our Lord! Perfect our light for us and forgive us. You certainly have power over all things.' Prophet, strive hard against the unbelievers and the hypocrites, and press hard on them. Their ultimate abode is hell, and how vile a journey's end. (Verses 6–9)

A believer's responsibility with regard to himself and his family is heavy and awesome. He and his family are liable to punishment in the fire of hell and it is his responsibility to protect himself and his family from such a dreadful fate. It is a terrible fire, "*fuelled by people and stones.*" (Verse 6) People there are treated in the same way as stones: cheap, abject and thrown away with a total disregard as to what may happen to them. A fire fuelled by stones must blaze fiercely, and a torment that combines its scourge with humiliation compounds the suffering. Everything about it is absolutely terrible: "*over [it] are appointed angels, stern and mighty,*" so that they suit the punishment they are required to administer. They "*never disobey God in whatever He commands them and always do what they are bidden to do.*" (Verse 6) By nature they always obey every command God gives them, and are well able to carry out any such assignment. Possessing such qualities, they are chosen to guard the fire of hell, while every believer is responsible for protecting himself and his family from it. He has to attend to his responsibility now, in this life, before it is too late. When the chance is gone, no excuse is acceptable. The unbelievers will try to present excuses, but they are confronted with the facts that leave them in utter despair: "*Unbelievers! Make no excuses today. You will only be requited for what you used to do.*" (Verse 7) That day is not a time for presenting excuses. It is the day when reward and punishment are given. The unbelievers will only take what their own actions incur.

How are the believers to protect themselves and their families from the fire of hell? The way is mapped out for them, and they are further equipped with great hope: "*Believers! Turn to God in sincere repentance. It may well be that your Lord will efface your bad deeds and admit you into*

gardens through which running waters flow, on a day when God will not disgrace the Prophet or those who believed with him. Their light will spread out before them, and on their right. They will say: 'Our Lord! Perfect our light for us and forgive us. You certainly have power over all things.'" (Verse 8) The way, then, begins with sincere repentance setting the heart on an honest course that allows no deception. This means genuine regret for past sins and a commitment to do what is good and required. Such repentance is certain to rid a person's heart of any residue sin may leave behind and encourages only what is good. Both qualities are necessary to make the repentance sincere and effective.

When repentance is sincere, it brings with it a hope that God will forgive the repentant their sins and admit them into heaven on the day when the unbelievers are given their humiliating punishment. No disgrace will on that day attach to the Prophet or those who followed him and accepted his message. This prospect is very tempting as it brings about great honour, with the believers being joined to the Prophet as one group treated with dignity when others are shamed. Furthermore, they are given light that "*spreads out before them and on their right.*" Thus they are identified among the great multitude, and they can find their way to their ultimate goal, which is heaven.

In that fearful position when everyone is in the grip of worried anticipation, they are inspired with a humble prayer: "*Our Lord! Perfect our light for us and forgive us. You certainly have power over all things.*" (Verse 8) The fact that they say such a prayer when the situation makes everyone speechless is a sign that their prayer will be answered. God inspires believers to offer such a prayer only when He will be pleased to answer it. This means that their very prayer is a blessing God bestows on them in addition to the honour and the light already given to them.

How different all this is from the fire fuelled by people and stones! However, both reward and punishment highlight the responsibility of every believer to protect himself and his family from the fire and to place them in a position where they deserve to receive the reward of heaven. In the light of the event that took place in the Prophet's home, we can appreciate the message given in these verses. A believer is responsible for setting his household on the right way, just as he is responsible for ensuring that he purges his heart of sin and follows divine guidance.

As we said in our commentary on the previous *sūrah*, Divorce, Islam is a faith that takes care of the family. Therefore, it sets certain duties and responsibilities a believer must fulfil with regard to his home and family. The home is the nucleus of the Muslim community. Muslim families are the cells that make up the Muslim society. Every single home is a fortress of faith that must have no flaw in its internal structure. Everyone inside guards their positions so that no external enemy can infiltrate them. Otherwise, the whole society would be penetrated from within, and so would fall apart should any external attack occur. It is the first duty of a believer to attend to his home and family so that it is internally solid and well guarded. Before he tries to present his message to others, he must close any loophole within.

In this set up, a Muslim mother has an essential role to play; a Muslim father cannot on his own ensure the security of the fortress. Together, the two must cooperate fully in the upbringing of their sons and daughters. A group of men on their own can never succeed in establishing a Muslim society. Indeed, it is women who have a more important role to play in taking care of the new generation and safeguarding the future of the Muslim community. Hence, the Qur'ān addressed both men and women. It set out a system for the Muslim home, placing on believers a clear responsibility for their families, in the same way as they are responsible for themselves: "*Believers! Guard yourselves and your families against a fire fuelled by people and stones.*" (Verse 6)

Advocates of Islam must be fully aware of this and ensure that they put it into practice. Their first efforts must be addressed to their homes: to their wives and mothers first, and to their children and the rest of their families. Great importance should be attached to the education of the Muslim woman, so that she can make her family home a Muslim home. Anyone who wants his home to be Islamic must start by choosing a Muslim wife. Otherwise, the formation of a Muslim community will take far too long and its structure will remain weak and flawed.

Our Own Hard Task

The situation with the first Muslim community was easier than it is in our present day. A Muslim society was already established in

Madīnah, where Islam, its vision of a clean, virtuous human life and its laws based on this vision were the driving force. Men and women looked up to God and His Messenger for judgement. When judgement was given, it was accepted as final. In such a society, it was easy for women to mould themselves as Islam wanted them to be. Likewise, it was easy for husbands to advise their wives and bring up their children in line with the Islamic system.

We are now in a totally different situation, as we have sunk back into a state of *jāhiliyyah* that influences our society, its laws, morality, traditions, systems, manners and culture. Women find themselves in the midst of this society and feel its crushing pressures as they try to bring their lives in line with Islam, whether on their own initiative or guided by their fathers, husbands or brothers.

In that first Muslim community, the man, the woman and society all had the same perspective and looked to the same source for judgement. In our own time, the man is looking up to a theoretical abstract while the woman writhes under the heavy pressure of a society that is extremely hostile to her perspective. There is no doubt that the pressures society brings to bear on women are many times greater than its pressure on men. Hence, a believing man has a double duty: he must not only protect himself from the fire but also protect his family that is exposed to such pressures.

A Muslim man must realize the size of his responsibility in order to address it properly. This requires that he exert much greater efforts than a Muslim man in the first Muslim community. This is why it is essential for anyone who wants to establish a Muslim home to look first of all for a partner who can guard his fort. She must be a woman who derives her perspective from the same source, Islam. He will have to sacrifice certain things. He must sacrifice superficial attractions that society presents, looking instead for a woman of firm belief who will help him in building a Muslim family. Muslim fathers who want to be part of the Islamic revival must also realize that the new cells in this revival are a trust they must safeguard. It is their task to educate, cultivate and bring them up on Islamic lines before they address their message to anyone else. Only in this way can they fulfil God's orders as He bids them to protect themselves and their families from the fire.

Once more we refer to the nature of Islam that requires the establishment of a community that runs its affairs according to Islam and gives it a practical presence. Islam is based on the need to establish a community that believes in it and adopts it as a way of life and a code of law. It is from Islam, the complete and perfect system, that this community derives all its concepts and perspectives. Such a community is the fertile soil where Islam finds its practical model. Within this community, people look at this model and feel free of the pressures of an un-Islamic society. Moreover, the Muslim community ensures that its members are not subjected to any persecution.

We, thus, see the importance of establishing a Muslim community where Muslim girls and women live, protected from the crushing pressures of the un-Islamic society around them. In such a community they are no longer torn apart by their own Islamic perspective and traditions that are un-Islamic. A young Muslim man will find in that community a woman who will share life with him in a family nest, or a fortress, which is the first and primary unit of the Islamic camp.

It is essential rather than merely desirable for an Islamic community to be established along Islamic lines, adopting Islamic ideas, morality, manners and life concepts and implementing them within its own ranks. Only such a community can safeguard its concepts and values, advocating them in a practical way, seen by all. Thus individuals in an un-Islamic society, who are addressed by the advocates of Islam, will look at Islamic life and be motivated to come out of the darkness in which they live and replace it with the light Islam provides. Eventually, when God wills that Islam should triumph, new generations will be raised under its care, protected from the *jāhiliyyah* that has long prevailed.

It was to protect the first Muslim community that the command was issued to the Prophet to strive hard against those who take a hostile stand towards it: "*Prophet, strive hard against the unbelievers and the hypocrites, and press hard on them. Their ultimate abode is hell, and how vile a journey's end.*" (Verse 9) This is particularly significant in light of the earlier command to the believers to protect themselves and their families against the fire of hell. It is also significant in respect of the invitation given to them to sincerely repent of their sins so that their bad deeds are erased and they are admitted into heaven. It highlights the importance

of safeguarding the environment where protection from the fire takes place. Thus, oppressive and wicked elements are not allowed to attack the Muslim community whether from outside, as the unbelievers used to do, or from within as the hypocrites did.

In its order to strive hard against the enemies of Islam, the Qur'ānic statement groups together both the unbelievers and the hypocrites because they shared the same mission – the destruction of the Muslim community, or at least its disintegration. To strive against them is, then, the sort of effort that protects from the fire, and to be hard against them is the proper response required of the Prophet and the believers in this present life. As for the life to come, "*their ultimate abode is hell, and how vile a journey's end.*" (Verse 9)

We note that the harmonious tune this second section of the *sūrah* sings of its message is also in perfect harmony with the first section that dealt with a particular event in the Prophet's own home.

Contrasting Examples

The third and final section of the *sūrah* sounds as if it is a direct continuation of its first section. It speaks of unbelieving women married to prophets and women believers in the midst of unbelievers:

> *God has given examples of unbelievers: Noah's wife and Lot's wife. They were married to two of Our righteous servants but betrayed them. Their husbands could be of no avail to them against God. They were told: 'Enter both of you the fire with all those who will enter it.' God has also given examples of believers: Pharaoh's wife, who said: 'My Lord! Build me a mansion in heaven near You, and save me from Pharaoh and his doings, and save me from the wrongdoing folk.' And Mary, the daughter of 'Imrān, who guarded her chastity; and We breathed of Our spirit into her. She accepted the truth of her Lord's words and His revealed books. She was truly devout.* (Verses 10–12)

Reports speaking of the betrayal of Noah and Lot by their wives suggest that it was a betrayal of their messages, rather than their being unfaithful to their marriage bonds. Noah's wife used to join the

unbelievers in his community in making fun of him, while Lot's wife used to inform his people when he received guests, knowing what they tried to do with such visitors.

Similarly, reports concerning Pharaoh's wife make it clear that she lived in his palace as a believer in God Almighty, and suggest that she was of Asian origin following a divine religion that was revealed before Moses' time. Historical reports mention that the mother of Eminhuteb IV, the Pharaoh who advocated belief in one god, making the sun a symbol of the divine being, calling himself Ekhnaton, was Asian and believed in a religion other than that known in Egypt. God only knows if she is the one referred to in this *sūrah*, or whether the reference is made to the Pharaoh challenged by Moses and his wife. Moses' Pharaoh is definitely different from Eminhuteb IV. We need not, however, be particularly concerned about the exact identity of Pharaoh's wife. What is important is that the Qur'ānic statement confirms a permanent fact in which individual people are only examples.

Having made an order to believers to protect themselves and their families from incurring punishment in hell, the *sūrah* now highlights the principle of individual responsibility. The Prophet's wives, and indeed wives of all believers, are told here that ultimately they are personally accountable for what they do and the decisions they make. Their individual responsibility cannot be waived merely because they are married to a prophet or to a devout believer. Both Noah's and Lot's wives "*were married to two of Our righteous servants but betrayed them. Their husbands could be of no avail to them against God. They were told: 'Enter both of you the fire with all those who will enter it.*'" (Verse 10) When the question is one of belief or unbelief, or one of betrayal of faith, there can be no special privilege for anyone, not even for prophets' wives.

Pharaoh's wife gives the perfect contrast. She was living in the midst of sweeping unbelief, but that did not deter her from seeking her own personal safety. She disowned all connection with Pharaoh's palace, praying to God to grant her a home in heaven. She disavowed any relation with Pharaoh, praying that God grant her safety from him. Realizing that as Pharaoh's wife she was the closest person to him and his actions, she feared that some blame might attach to her. She, therefore, made it clear that she had nothing to do with all this, further praying

to God that He keep her away from it: "*And save me from Pharaoh and his doings.*" (Verse 11) She disowned Pharaoh's people while at the same time living in their midst: "*And save me from the wrongdoing folk.*" (Verse 11)

Pharaoh's wife's prayer and her overall position is a shining example of rejecting all temptation that the life of this world can offer, even at its most splendid. Pharaoh was the most powerful king on earth, and his palace offered the best that a woman could desire. Yet his wife chose faith in preference to all this. She did not merely treat it with contempt; she considered it evil and sought refuge with God from yielding to it, praying to be saved from it and its consequences. Yet Pharaoh's wife was a woman standing on her own in the midst of a great kingdom, which makes her all the more admirable and gives her an even greater position. As we have stated earlier, women are more sensitive and responsive to social pressures. However, this woman, on her own, resisted the pressures exerted by society, the palace, the throne, the courtiers and her own royal position, lifting her head to heaven seeking its light. She certainly provides a great example of submission to God, resisting all temptations and overcoming all impediments. Hence she deserved her special mention in God's book, the words of which are echoed throughout the universe as they are revealed from on high.

"*And Mary, the daughter of 'Imrān,*" provides another example of total dedication. Her story is given from its early beginnings elsewhere in the Qur'ān. Her distinctive quality mentioned here is her purity, "*who guarded her chastity.*" (Verse 12) Thus, her innocence is made absolutely clear, refuting the vile accusations the Jews levelled at her. "*And We breathed of Our spirit into her.*" (Verse 12) It was from this breathing of God's spirit into her that Jesus, her son, was born, as detailed in *Sūrah* 19, Maryam. We will not go into the details of his birth here, limiting ourselves only to the discussion of the present text which highlights Mary's purity, complete faith and total obedience of God: "*She accepted the truth of her Lord's words and His revealed books. She was truly devout.*" (Verse 12)

The fact that Pharaoh's wife is the one chosen to be mentioned here together with Mary is indicative of her own sublime status; a status enhanced by the special circumstances of her own life. Both ladies are

splendid examples of women who combined firm faith with purity of behaviour and total devotion. God sets these two examples for the Prophet's own wives in the context of the event reported in the first section of the *sūrah*. They are also examples set before believing women in all generations.

This *sūrah* gives us a glimpse of the Prophet's own life, drawn in the inspiring style of the Qur'ān. No human report speaking of the period can give us a similar picture. This because Qur'ānic expressions are more inspiring and far-reaching. In this way, a single event is cited to state the truth that remains valid for the rest of time.

SŪRAH 67

Al-Mulk

(Dominion)

Prologue

Whereas the revelation of the previous ten *sūrahs* (57–66) took place in Madīnah, this *sūrah* and all nine that follow in this volume were revealed in Makkah. Each type has its own features and leaves its special impressions on the reader. Makkan revelation generally deals with belief in God, revelation and the Day of Judgement, as well as establishing concepts about life, the universe and its relation with its Creator based on such beliefs. It speaks about God, the Creator, in such a way that makes our hearts feel His presence and outlines the sort of emotions and manners that are appropriate for a human being who addresses his Lord and looks up to Him. It clearly sets the standards and values a Muslim adopts in judging events, situations and people. As we discuss the remaining *sūrahs* in this volume, we will see examples of such treatment, to be added to what we have already seen in other Makkan *sūrahs*.

Revelations given in Madīnah address the implementation of such beliefs, concepts, standards and values in practical life. They urge people to live up to their faith, which is the trust assigned to them. They must fulfil their obligations both within themselves and in their public lives.

The present *surah* seeks to formulate a new concept of the universe and its relations with its Creator.

It is broad, comprehensive concept that transcends that world we live in and our limited lifespans to include the universe at large and the life to come.

so that we do not focus solely on our present life on earth

The present *sūrah* seeks to formulate a new concept of the universe and its relation with its Creator. It is a broad, comprehensive concept that transcends the world we live in and our limited lifespans to include the universe at large and the life to come. It speaks of creatures living on earth alongside man, such as the *jinn* and the birds, or belonging to the hereafter, such as hell and its guards. Furthermore, it refers to worlds beyond the reach of our human perception bringing these closer to our feelings so that we do not focus solely on our present life on earth. It invites us to reflect on what we see in our lives and within ourselves but which we tend to take for granted.

It awakens within man all images and impressions that have long been stagnant as a result of holding on to *jāhiliyyah* concepts. It removes the dust that has gathered over our feelings, opens windows and releases minds, and frees senses and perceptions so that they can look at the wide horizon, the vast space, the deep oceans, the inner soul and the world beyond, reflecting on God's marvellous creation. It invites us to look at how the universe moves on by God's will. We thus realize that the whole thing is far greater and its scope much wider than we could possibly have imagined. Then, we no longer focus on our earth, but instead look up to heaven; we move from what we see to the truth beyond and we are able to see how God's will both brings life and controls it.

Life and death are two familiar phenomena. Yet the *sūrah* invites us to look at what lies beyond these two phenomena of God's will, wisdom, and the way He sets tests and conducts all affairs. It is God: "*who has created death as well as life, so that He may put you to a test to show who of you is best in conduct. He alone is Almighty, Much-Forgiving.*" (Verse 2) The skies above are creatures people see with their eyes. Yet they do not look beyond them to see God's hand that brought them into existence, nor the perfection they manifest. The *sūrah*, however, initiates action so that we contemplate such beauty and perfection as well as the ultimate objective of creation: "*He created seven heavens in layers. No fault will you see in what the Lord of Grace creates. Turn up your eyes: can you see any flaw? Then look again, and again: your vision will come back to you dull and weary. We have adorned the lowest heaven with lamps and made them missiles to pelt the devils with.*" (Verses 3–5)

To those who live in a state of ignorance, or *jāhiliyyah*, the life of this world appears to be the ultimate objective. The *sūrah*, however, presents another world to devils and unbelievers, a world that is full of movement and expectation. It stands in waiting: "*We have prepared for them suffering through the blazing fire. Suffering in hell awaits those who deny their Lord: an evil destination. When they are thrown in it, they will hear it drawing in its breath as it boils up, almost bursting with fury. Every time a group is thrown in it, its keepers will ask them, 'Did no one come to warn you?' 'Yes,' they will reply, 'a warner did indeed come to us, but we did not believe him. We said, "God has revealed nothing. You are in total error."' They will further say, 'Had we but listened, or reasoned, we would not now be among the inhabitants of the blazing fire.' Thus they shall confess their sins. Far be the inhabitants of the blazing fire [from God's mercy].*" (Verses 5–11)

In a world of *jāhiliyyah*, people hardly ever look beyond their immediate life or think of a world beyond what they can perceive. They are, as it were, locked within the cage of their current life on earth. The *sūrah*, therefore, directs their minds and sights to look to what is beyond, to the heavens and the divine will which, though unseen by any human eye, can do whatever it wills, whenever and wherever it chooses. Thus, the earth, stable as it appears before their eyes, is strongly shaken: "*Whether you keep your words secret or state them openly, He has full knowledge of what is in all hearts. How could it be that He who has created should not know all? He is indeed Most Gracious, All-Aware. He it is who has made the earth easy to live upon. Go about, then, in all its highlands and eat of His provisions. To Him you will be resurrected. Do you feel secure that He who is in heaven will not cause the earth to swallow you up when it quakes? Or do you feel secure that He who is in heaven will not let loose against you a sandy whirlwind. You will come to know the truth of My warning.*" (Verses 13–17)

They look at birds, an aspect of creation they see frequently but which they rarely contemplate its marvellous creation. The *sūrah* again fixes their eyes on this and lets their minds appreciate God's power as He shapes and fashions His creation: "*Do they not see the birds above them, spreading their wings and drawing them in? None but the Lord of Grace holds them up. He sees everything.*" (Verse 19)

They feel safe and secure on earth, but this is only the false sense of one who is oblivious to what God's will and power may bring about. Having shaken the earth under their feet, including all that forms their environment, the *sūrah* then shakes them even harder so that they realize that nothing can ever withstand God's power, which they hardly ever even take into account: "*What army is there to come to your aid, except for the Lord of Grace? The unbelievers are truly lost in self-delusion.*" (Verse 20)

They feel that the provisions they have are close at hand, and that they can compete for them as they please. The *sūrah*, however, directs their attentions to look far beyond the elements they think to be involved in securing their provisions: "*Who will provide for you, if He were to withhold His provision? Yet they persist in their arrogance and in rebellion.*" (Verse 21)

As they pursue their erring ways, thinking they are well guided, the *sūrah* paints them a vivid, inspiring image showing their own condition and that of those who truly follow correct guidance: "*Is he who goes grovelling on his face better guided than the one who walks upright on a straight path?*" (Verse 22)

They do not benefit by what God has placed in their make-up of talents, faculties and perceptions. They do not go beyond what they perceive so as to look at what lies beyond their immediate world. The *sūrah* reminds them of God's grace as He has given them these abilities, and directs them to use these in a way that tries to divine the future and determine the ultimate objective: "*Say: 'It is He who has brought you into being, and given you hearing, sight and hearts. Yet seldom are you thankful. And He it is who caused you to multiply on earth; and to Him you shall be gathered.*" (Verses 23–24)

Even in their persistent denial of the resurrection, they still constantly ask about its timing. The *sūrah* depicts this as a true and imminent event, one that will approach them all of a sudden. Hence, they have nothing but distaste for it: "*They say: 'When is this promise to be fulfilled, if what you say be true?' Say: 'God alone has knowledge of this. I am only a plain warner.' When they see it close at hand, the unbelievers' faces will be stricken with grief, and it will be said: 'This is what you were calling for.'*" (Verses 25–27)

They hope that the Prophet and those who follow him will perish, as this will silence this voice that has for long irritated them by the warnings it delivers. They would rather revert to their foolish slumber. The *sūrah* reminds them that whether this group of believers perish or flourish, it cannot affect their own destiny that is determined by a persistent rejection of faith. Hence, they are better advised to look at their own situation and to make amends before it is too late: "*Say: 'Just think: whether God destroys me and those who follow me, or bestows mercy upon us, who will protect the unbelievers from painful suffering?' Say: 'He is the Lord of Grace: in Him we believe, and in Him we place our trust. You will come to know who is in manifest error.'*" (Verses 28–29)

Finally, the *sūrah* warns them that water, which is essential for life, may be taken away by God, whom the unbelievers deny: "*Say: Just think: if all your water were to sink underground, who would give you clear flowing water?*" (Verse 30)

The key to the whole *sūrah* and the axis of the movement it sets in our hearts, minds, senses and feelings are found in its inspiring opening: "*Blessed be He in whose hand all dominion rests; who has power over all things.*" (Verse 1) It is from the truth of God's dominion and power that all images presented in the *sūrah*, as well as all hidden and apparent movements to which it alludes, branch out. Thus, the creation of life and death, testing people through them, the creation of the heavens and their adornment with lamps that serve as missiles pelting devils, the preparation of hell as it is described, the knowledge of what is secret and public, making the earth easy for humans to live upon, the destruction of early communities who rejected divine guidance, holding birds in the sky, God's overwhelming power and His exaltation, providing sustenance to all as He pleases, His creation of people and granting them hearing, eyesight and hearts, causing them to multiply on earth and then gathering them all, His full knowledge of the hereafter which is His own preserve, the meting out of punishment to the unbelievers, the provision of water, which is essential to life, and the ability to take it away whenever He wishes all emanate from the fact that to God belongs all dominion in the universe. He has power over all things.

The *sūrah* states a long sequence of truths that flow uninterruptedly with successive impressions and ideas to explain its concise, yet comprehensive, opening. It is, therefore, difficult to divide into passages. Let us, then, look at it as it develops its theme from start to finish.

I

The Sovereign of the Universe

Al-Mulk (Dominion)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

Blessed be He in whose hand all dominion rests; who has power over all things; (1)

who has created death as well as life, so that He may put you to a test to show who of you is best in conduct. He alone is Almighty, Much-Forgiving. (2)

He created seven heavens in layers. No fault will you see in what the Lord of Grace creates. Turn up your eyes: can you see any flaw? (3)

Then look again, and again: your vision will come back to you dull and weary. (4)

We have adorned the lowest heaven with lamps and made them missiles to pelt the devils with. We have prepared for them suffering through the blazing fire. (5)

وَلَقَدْ زَيَّنَّا ٱلسَّمَآءَ ٱلدُّنْيَا بِمَصَٰبِيحَ وَجَعَلْنَٰهَا رُجُومًا لِّلشَّيَٰطِينِ ۖ وَأَعْتَدْنَا لَهُمْ عَذَابَ ٱلسَّعِيرِ ﴿٥﴾

Suffering in hell awaits those who deny their Lord: an evil destination. (6)

وَلِلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ بِرَبِّهِمْ عَذَابُ جَهَنَّمَ ۖ وَبِئْسَ ٱلْمَصِيرُ ﴿٦﴾

When they are thrown in it, they will hear it drawing in its breath as it boils up, (7)

إِذَآ أُلْقُوا۟ فِيهَا سَمِعُوا۟ لَهَا شَهِيقًا وَهِىَ تَفُورُ ﴿٧﴾

almost bursting with fury. Every time a group is thrown in it, its keepers will ask them, 'Did no one come to warn you?' (8)

تَكَادُ تَمَيَّزُ مِنَ ٱلْغَيْظِ ۖ كُلَّمَآ أُلْقِىَ فِيهَا فَوْجٌ سَأَلَهُمْ خَزَنَتُهَآ أَلَمْ يَأْتِكُمْ نَذِيرٌ ﴿٨﴾

'Yes,' they will reply, 'a warner did indeed come to us, but we did not believe him. We said, "God has revealed nothing. You are in total error."' (9)

قَالُوا۟ بَلَىٰ قَدْ جَآءَنَا نَذِيرٌ فَكَذَّبْنَا وَقُلْنَا مَا نَزَّلَ ٱللَّهُ مِن شَىْءٍ إِنْ أَنتُمْ إِلَّا فِى ضَلَٰلٍ كَبِيرٍ ﴿٩﴾

They will further say, 'Had we but listened, or reasoned, we would not now be among the inhabitants of the blazing fire.' (10)

وَقَالُوا۟ لَوْ كُنَّا نَسْمَعُ أَوْ نَعْقِلُ مَا كُنَّا فِىٓ أَصْحَٰبِ ٱلسَّعِيرِ ﴿١٠﴾

Thus they shall confess their sins. Far be the inhabitants of the blazing fire [from God's mercy]. (11)

فَٱعْتَرَفُوا۟ بِذَنۢبِهِمْ فَسُحْقًا لِّأَصْحَٰبِ ٱلسَّعِيرِ ﴿١١﴾

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ يَخۡشَوۡنَ رَبَّهُم بِٱلۡغَيۡبِ لَهُم
مَّغۡفِرَةٞ وَأَجۡرٞ كَبِيرٞ ﴿١٢﴾

Those who stand in awe of their Lord although He is beyond the reach of human perception will have forgiveness and a rich reward. (12)

وَأَسِرُّواْ قَوۡلَكُمۡ أَوِ ٱجۡهَرُواْ بِهِۦٓۖ إِنَّهُۥ
عَلِيمُۢ بِذَاتِ ٱلصُّدُورِ ﴿١٣﴾

Whether you keep your words secret or state them openly, He has full knowledge of what is in all hearts. (13)

أَلَا يَعۡلَمُ مَنۡ خَلَقَ وَهُوَ ٱللَّطِيفُ ٱلۡخَبِيرُ ﴿١٤﴾

How could it be that He who has created should not know all? He is indeed Most Gracious, All-Aware. (14)

هُوَ ٱلَّذِي جَعَلَ لَكُمُ ٱلۡأَرۡضَ ذَلُولٗا
فَٱمۡشُواْ فِي مَنَاكِبِهَا وَكُلُواْ مِن رِّزۡقِهِۦۖ وَإِلَيۡهِ
ٱلنُّشُورُ ﴿١٥﴾

He it is who has made the earth easy to live upon. Go about, then, in all its highlands and eat of His provisions. To Him you will be resurrected. (15)

ءَأَمِنتُم مَّن فِي ٱلسَّمَآءِ أَن يَخۡسِفَ بِكُمُ
ٱلۡأَرۡضَ فَإِذَا هِيَ تَمُورُ ﴿١٦﴾

Do you feel secure that He who is in heaven will not cause the earth to swallow you up when it quakes? (16)

أَمۡ أَمِنتُم مَّن فِي ٱلسَّمَآءِ أَن يُرۡسِلَ عَلَيۡكُمۡ
حَاصِبٗاۖ فَسَتَعۡلَمُونَ كَيۡفَ نَذِيرِ ﴿١٧﴾

Or do you feel secure that He who is in heaven will not let loose against you a sandy whirlwind. You will come to know the truth of My warning. (17)

وَلَقَدۡ كَذَّبَ ٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبۡلِهِمۡ فَكَيۡفَ
كَانَ نَكِيرِ ﴿١٨﴾

Those who lived before them also disbelieved. How terrible was My rejection of them? (18)

Do they not see the birds above them, spreading their wings and drawing them in? None but the Lord of Grace holds them up. He sees everything. (19)

أَوَلَمْ يَرَوْا۟ إِلَى ٱلطَّيْرِ فَوْقَهُمْ صَـٰٓفَّـٰتٍ وَيَقْبِضْنَ ۚ مَا يُمْسِكُهُنَّ إِلَّا ٱلرَّحْمَـٰنُ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ بِكُلِّ شَىْءٍۭ بَصِيرٌ ﴿١٩﴾

What army is there to come to your aid, except for the Lord of Grace? The unbelievers are truly lost in self-delusion. (20)

أَمَّنْ هَـٰذَا ٱلَّذِى هُوَ جُندٌ لَّكُمْ يَنصُرُكُم مِّن دُونِ ٱلرَّحْمَـٰنِ ۚ إِنِ ٱلْكَـٰفِرُونَ إِلَّا فِى غُرُورٍ ﴿٢٠﴾

Who will provide for you, if He were to withhold His provision? Yet they persist in their arrogance and in rebellion. (21)

أَمَّنْ هَـٰذَا ٱلَّذِى يَرْزُقُكُمْ إِنْ أَمْسَكَ رِزْقَهُۥ ۚ بَل لَّجُّوا۟ فِى عُتُوٍّ وَنُفُورٍ ﴿٢١﴾

Is he who goes grovelling on his face better guided than the one who walks upright on a straight path? (22)

أَفَمَن يَمْشِى مُكِبًّا عَلَىٰ وَجْهِهِۦٓ أَهْدَىٰٓ أَمَّن يَمْشِى سَوِيًّا عَلَىٰ صِرَٰطٍ مُّسْتَقِيمٍ ﴿٢٢﴾

Say: 'It is He who has brought you into being, and given you hearing, sight and hearts. Yet seldom are you thankful. (23)

قُلْ هُوَ ٱلَّذِىٓ أَنشَأَكُمْ وَجَعَلَ لَكُمُ ٱلسَّمْعَ وَٱلْأَبْصَـٰرَ وَٱلْأَفْـِٔدَةَ ۖ قَلِيلًا مَّا تَشْكُرُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

And He it is who caused you to multiply on earth; and to Him you shall be gathered.' (24)

قُلْ هُوَ ٱلَّذِى ذَرَأَكُمْ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ وَإِلَيْهِ تُحْشَرُونَ ﴿٢٤﴾

They say: 'When is this promise to be fulfilled, if what you say be true?' (25)

وَيَقُولُونَ مَتَىٰ هَـٰذَا ٱلْوَعْدُ إِن كُنتُمْ صَـٰدِقِينَ ﴿٢٥﴾

Say: 'God alone has knowledge of this. I am only a plain warner.' (26)

قُلْ إِنَّمَا ٱلْعِلْمُ عِندَ ٱللَّهِ وَإِنَّمَآ أَنَا۠ نَذِيرٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٢٦﴾

When they see it close at hand, the unbelievers' faces will be stricken with grief, and it will be said: 'This is what you were calling for.' (27)

فَلَمَّا رَأَوْهُ زُلْفَةً سِيٓـَٔتْ وُجُوهُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ وَقِيلَ هَٰذَا ٱلَّذِى كُنتُم بِهِۦ تَدَّعُونَ ﴿٢٧﴾

Say: 'Just think: whether God destroys me and those who follow me, or bestows mercy upon us, who will protect the unbelievers from painful suffering?' (28)

قُلْ أَرَءَيْتُمْ إِنْ أَهْلَكَنِىَ ٱللَّهُ وَمَن مَّعِىَ أَوْ رَحِمَنَا فَمَن يُجِيرُ ٱلْكَٰفِرِينَ مِنْ عَذَابٍ أَلِيمٍ ﴿٢٨﴾

Say: 'He is the Lord of Grace: in Him we believe, and in Him we place our trust. You will come to know who is in manifest error.' (29)

قُلْ هُوَ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنُ ءَامَنَّا بِهِۦ وَعَلَيْهِ تَوَكَّلْنَا ۖ فَسَتَعْلَمُونَ مَنْ هُوَ فِى ضَلَٰلٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٢٩﴾

Say: 'Just think: if all your water were to sink underground, who would give you clear flowing water?' (30)

قُلْ أَرَءَيْتُمْ إِنْ أَصْبَحَ مَآؤُكُمْ غَوْرًا فَمَن يَأْتِيكُم بِمَآءٍ مَّعِينٍۭ ﴿٣٠﴾

God's Power of Creation

> *Blessed be He in whose hand all dominion rests; who has power over all things.* (Verse 1)

Coming as it does at the outset of the *sūrah*, this glorification imparts a feeling of the multiplication of God's blessings and their continued outflowing. The fact that dominion is mentioned alongside it suggests

This glorification imparts a feeling of the multiplication of God's blessings and their continued overflowing.

that this blessing flows over God's kingdom. Hence, it is glorified throughout the universe, as it is glorified with God Himself. It sounds like a hymn echoed throughout the universe and within every creature's heart. It begins with the divine word in God's glorious book, the Qur'ān, inscribed in a well-guarded record, and which spreads throughout the universe.

"*Blessed be He in whose hand all dominion rests.*" (Verse 1) He is the Sovereign who has full control over the universe; He conducts its affairs. When this truth is established in the human heart, its direction and destination become well defined. It no longer turns to anyone or relies on anyone other than the Sovereign to whom all dominion belongs. It feels free from submission to anyone else. It, thus, addresses its worship to none other than Him.

His will is subject to neither limitation nor restriction

"*Who has power over all things.*" (Verse 1) Nothing escapes Him, and no one diverts or limits His will. He creates and does what He wants. He has full power over everything. His will is subject to neither limitation nor restriction. As this truth becomes well established, the human mind is free to perceive God's will and action that are free of any restriction our senses, perception of reality or what lies beyond it, or indeed our imagination can visualize. God's power extends far beyond anything that a human mind can entertain. After all, human imagination is restricted in its expectation of change by what is familiar to it. Appreciation of the truth of God's limitless power removes this restriction. Hence, a believer expects God's power to accomplish anything, without limit or restriction.

Friday, 11th of June, 2021 at 7 am at Alice Springs

> *Who has created death as well as life, so that He may put you to a test to show who of you is best in conduct. He alone is Almighty, Much-Forgiving.* (Verse 2)

One of the results of His complete dominion of the universe and absolute power over all things is that He created death and life. The term 'death' in this context includes the death that precedes life and the one that follows its end, whereas 'life' includes this first life and the life to come. All these are of God's creation as stated in this verse. In this way, it establishes this truth in the human mind, alerting it to the test it aims

The test aims to establish, in reality, what God knows in advance of peoples's behaviour on earth and the reward they merit for their actions.

to set. Nothing, then, comes by blind coincidence or without purpose. The test aims to establish, in reality, what God knows in advance of people's behaviour on earth and the reward they merit for their actions: "*so that He may put you to a test to show who of you is best in conduct.*" (Verse 2) Thus, man should always be on the alert, considering every thought and every action. He should not be oblivious to anything. This also means that he is unable to rest. Hence, the verse ends with the comment, "*He alone is Almighty, Much-Forgiving.*" It thus gives reassurance to every God-fearing servant. God is certainly Almighty, but He is at the same time Much-Forgiving. When a person's heart is alert, aware that this life is a test, and tries to keep on the right track, he is reassured of God's forgiveness and grace. This gives man all the rest and comfort he needs.

The truth Islam establishes in people's hearts does not depict God as chasing humans to afflict or punish them. He only wants them to be aware of the purpose behind their existence and of their true nature. He wants them to rise to the level worthy of His honour when He blew of His own spirit into them, elevating them above many of His other creations. When they have absorbed this truth and hold to it, they will find that His grace, mercy and forgiveness are always available to them.

To provide a basis for; establish or found: "innovative cuisines firmly anchored in tradition" (Gourmet Magazine).

In the Wide Universe

This great truth is then anchored to the universe at its broadest and highest. At the same time, the universe is shown to be related to the truth of reward and requital in the life to come:

(rɪ kwaɪtəl)
1. the act or an instance of requiting
2. a return or compensation for a good or bad action
requite (rɪˈkwaɪt)

He created seven heavens in layers. No fault will you see in what the Lord of Grace creates. Turn up your eyes: can you see any flaw? Then look again, and again: your vision will come back to you dull and weary. We have adorned the lowest heaven with lamps and made them missiles to pelt the devils with. We have prepared for them suffering through the blazing fire. Suffering in hell awaits those who deny their Lord: an evil destination. When they are thrown in it, they will hear it drawing in its breath as it boils up, almost bursting with fury. Every time a group is thrown in it, its keepers will ask them, 'Did no one

an aspect of ..... His free, unrestricted power.

I was reading it as "and is an aspect of the complete sovereignty God exercises over His dominion and ***over*** His free, unrestricted power.

The meaning completely changes by putting *over* in place of *of*. I thought the translator made a gross mistake. I referred to the original Arabic version. It appeared that so such problem of duality of being and attributes appears in the original Arabic version.
I put the arrow here, in order to make the reading free from any misunderstanding. When I was putting arrow I noticed that *of* has been used before "His free, unrestricted power" not *over*.
Therefore, I understood that there is not duality of being and attributes and that the sense is not that God exercises sovereignty over His free, unrestricted power."
Wherefore, I also understood that how small changes can alter our understanding and how small words might have caused the misunderstandings and confusions that plagued the Christian world and at times Muslim world and pushed the believers into the quagmire and quicksand of misunderstanding and sactarianism.
[illegible] ائی کہ عقیدے اور کلام کے مسائل کس طرح سے پیدا ہو جاتے ہیں۔

come to warn you?' 'Yes,' they will reply, 'a warner did indeed come to us, but we did not believe him. We said, "God has revealed nothing. You are in total error."' They will further say, 'Had we but listened, or reasoned, we would not now be among the inhabitants of the blazing fire.' Thus they shall confess their sins. Far be the inhabitants of the blazing fire [from God's mercy]. (Verses 3–11)

Everything this passage mentions is a result of the first verse and is an aspect of the complete sovereignty God exercises over His dominion and of His free, unrestricted power. Everything it contains confirms what the second verse states of the creation of death and life to test people and then their reward according to what their test proves.

"*He created seven heavens in layers.*" (Verse 3) We cannot, on the basis of astronomical theories, exactly ascertain the meaning of the expression '*seven heavens in layers*'. These theories are subject to amendment and correction with every new generation of telescopes and other machines and tools. It is not right, therefore, to attach the meaning of the Qur'ānic statement to discoveries that remain subject to amendment and correction. It is sufficient for us to know that there are seven heavens, and that they are placed in layers of different dimensions.

Whilst the Qur'ān always turns our attentions to God's creation generally, it also specifically directs us to the heavens above. The perfection of His creation is enough to make our eyes turn back in absolute amazement: "*No fault will you see in what the Lord of Grace creates.*" (Verse 3) No flaw, no defect, no imbalance is ever seen in God's creation. "*Turn up your eyes,*" and look again. "*Can you see any flaw?*" (Verse 3) Can you detect anything out of place? "*Then look again, and again.*" (Verse 4) You might have overlooked something in your first perusal, so make sure by looking again and again. "*Your vision will come back to you dull and weary.*" (Verse 4)

Posing such a challenge heightens the importance of what people are being directed towards. In this way, they are made to look seriously at the heavens and at God's creation in general. It is precisely such a contemplating, examining look that the Qur'ān wants people to cast. Familiarity breeds contempt, and our long presence in this world takes much away from its fascinating perfection and meticulous cohesion.

Familiarity breeds contempt

overwhelmingly amazing festival of wonders

Yet a careful look will not tire of examining the beauty of the world around us; our hearts will want more of its inspiration, and our minds will reflect endlessly on the universe's perfect balance. When we cast such a reflective and examining look at the universe we see it as an overwhelmingly amazing festival of wonders. Every time we so look our eyes and minds see something new.

Anyone who knows even a little about the nature of the universe and its system, some aspects of which have been uncovered by modern science, is bound to be absolutely fascinated. Yet appreciation of the universe's miraculous beauty does not need such scientific discoveries. One aspect of God's blessings is that He has given man the ability to interact with the universe by merely looking at it and contemplating its many different facets. Our hearts directly receive the tune of this awesomely beautiful universe and can respond to it as living creatures respond to each other.

Therefore, the Qur'ān invites people to look at the universe and reflect on its wonders. The Qur'ān addresses all people, across all generations: it addresses those who live in the jungle or the desert, as well as city dwellers and sea travellers. It presents its truth to the person who cannot read or write just as it does to astronomers, physicists and scientists. Everyone of these find in the Qur'ān what invites him to establish contact with the universe. It is that that alerts his heart to reflect on and enjoy what he sees.

Perfection and beauty stem from the same truth
When perfection is attained, beauty is part of it.

Like perfection, beauty is also deliberately placed in the universe. Indeed, the two stem from the same truth. When perfection is attained, beauty is a part of it. Hence, having drawn our attention to the perfection in the creation of the heavens, the Qur'ān now mentions their beauty: "*We have adorned the lowest heaven with lamps.*" (Verse 5) What is the lowest heaven? Perhaps it is the one nearest to the earth and its people to whom the Qur'ān is addressed. The lamps mentioned here may refer to the stars and planets that we see with the naked eye as we look up to the sky. This fits with the invitation to look at the sky at a time when they had nothing other than their eyes and what they saw of shining stars.

Undoubtedly, the sight of stars in the sky is immensely beautiful. Such beauty is always renewed, emanating different aspects at different times, morning or evening, sunrise or sunset, a moonlit night or a moonless

1.
a. Covered or obscured, as with clouds or mist.
b. Clouded over.
2. Gloomy; melancholy.
3. Sewn with long, overlying stitches in order to prevent raveling, as the raw edges of fabric.

one, clear skies or overcast ones. Indeed, its beauty differs from one hour to the next, from one observatory or angle to another. Yet the sky is always awesome in its beauty. Look at that single star flickering at a distance, as though it is a beautiful eye, shining with the appeal of love. Those two other stars appear removed from the rest, as though they are two lovers whispering to each other, away from the crowd. Look around and you see clusters joining together here and there, as if they are a group enjoying a night out in the great and vast open space. They seem to come together or go their separate ways like those attending a night performance in the open air. The moon appears in full splendour one night, dreamy on another, feeling low and dispirited on a third, and looking like a newborn starting life one night and like an elderly expecting the end on another. Look also at this vast space that stretches way beyond what our eyes can see. It is all part of the beauty of this universe; a beauty we can only look at and enjoy, but about which we do not have the words and expressions to describe.

The Qur'ān directs our hearts to reflect on the beauty of the skies and the universe as a whole, because appreciating such beauty is the closest way to comprehend their Creator's own beauty. It is this comprehension that elevates man to the highest level he can attain. When he reaches this, he is ready for an eternal life in a splendid world that is free from the shackles of earthly life. The happiest moments for a human heart are those in which it appreciates the beauty of God's creation in the universe. These are the moments that make it possible for him to feel and appreciate divine beauty.

أصول التفسير

Pelting Lamps

The *sūrah* states that the lamps which adorn the lowest heaven also have another function: "*And made them missiles to pelt the devils with.*" (Verse 5) We have established a rule in this commentary that we do not try to add any explanation to any matter relating to the world beyond our faculties of perception. We limit ourselves only to whatever God tells us about them, leaving the Qur'ānic text as it is. This is certainly enough to state whatever is needed for our comprehension. We certainly believe that a different type of creation is the devils. Some description of them

is given in the Qur'ān, and we have referred to these in our commentary wherever they occur. We have though added nothing to what the Qur'ān states. We, therefore, believe that these lamps, which God placed as adornments of the lowest heaven, are also used as missiles to pelt devils with. This may be in the form of shooting stars, as mentioned in another *sūrah*: "*We have adorned the skies nearest to the earth with stars, and have made them secure against every rebellious devil... If any of them stealthily snatches away a fragment, he will be pursued by a piercing flame.*" (37: 6–7 and 10) How? In what form and of what size? God has told us nothing of this and we have no other source to refer to in such matters. Therefore, we have all we need to know and we should believe in this as it is. This is all there is to it. Had God known that further details or explanations would have benefited us, He would have given us these. Why, then, should we try to reach to what God knows to be of no use to us in such a matter as the pelting or shooting of devils?

The *sūrah* speaks further about what God has in store for such devils, other than these pelting missiles: "*We have prepared for them suffering through the blazing fire.*" (Verse 5) This means that they will be pelted with missiles in this present life and that they will suffer the blazing fire in the life to come. Perhaps this comes as a follow up to what the *sūrah* says about the heavens and prior to what it says about the unbelievers. The relation between devils and unbelievers is obvious. Thus, having mentioned the heavens and their lamps, the *sūrah* refers to these lamps' other function, as missiles for pelting devils. Then, as it speaks of what is prepared for these devils in the life to come, the *sūrah* mentions what is made ready for the unbelievers who follow those devils: "*Suffering in hell awaits those who deny their Lord: an evil destination.*" (Verse 6) It then carries on to give us an image of hell, full of rage and anger, as it receives the unbelievers: "*When they are thrown in it, they will hear it drawing in its breath as it boils up, almost bursting with fury.*" (Verses 7–8)

Praised by All Creatures

Hell seems here to be a living creature, one suppressing its fury, but as a result of which draws its breath and boils over. Its anger is so immense that it almost bursts with hate for the unbelievers. Although

this may appear to some as an allegorical description of hell, to my mind, it describes a reality. Every creature of God is a living creature, with a life suited to its kind. Every creature knows its Lord and addresses Him with glorifications and praises. They are amazed at man when he denies his Creator and feel anger as a result. This is mentioned in several places in the Qur'ān, suggesting that it is an established reality in the universe.

For example, the following clear statement occurs in the Qur'ān: "*The seven heavens extol His limitless glory, as does the earth, and all who dwell in them. Indeed every single thing extols His glory and praise, but you cannot understand their praises. He is indeed Forbearing, Much Forgiving.*" (17: 44) The Qur'ān also says: "*We graced David with Our favour. We said: 'You mountains, sing with him God's praises! And likewise you birds!'*" (34: 10) These statements are so clear that they admit no interpretation other than what they literally say. Another Qur'ānic statement says: "*Then, He applied His design to the sky, which was but smoke; and said to it and to the earth: 'Come, both of you, willingly or unwillingly.' They both said: 'We do come willingly.'*" (41: 11) This last statement may be said to be an allegory of how the skies and earth submit to God's law, but there is no need to make such an interpretation. It is further removed than the direct and clear meaning intended.

We have the present description of hell, but a similar statement describes the surprise and anger expressed by different creatures at the thought of attributing to God a son: "*They say: 'The Most Merciful has taken to Himself a son!' Indeed you have said a most monstrous falsehood, at which the heavens might be rent into fragments, and the earth be split asunder, and the mountains fall down in ruins! That people should ascribe a son to the Most Merciful, although it is inconceivable that the Most Merciful should take to Himself a son.*" (19: 88–92)

All these statements refer to the truth that the universe believes in its Creator, and that everything extols His glory and praise. They also confirm that all creatures shudder at the thought that man departs from this norm, disbelieving in his Lord. All these creatures feel anger when someone close and dear to them is badly hurt. It is no different from the anger a person is ready to vent at the one who committed such behaviour. He is almost bursting with fury, just like hell is described here: "*It boils up, almost bursting with fury.*" (Verses 7–8)

The same is expressed by the angels who guard hell: "*Every time a group is thrown in it, its keepers will ask them, 'Did no one come to warn you?'*" (Verse 8) It is clear that the question is meant as a rebuke. They share hell's anger and they participate in meting out punishment. Nothing hurts a person in distress more than a rebuke. The answer is given in humility, acknowledging their own lack of judgement and utter stupidity when they denied God's oneness, relying on no evidence whatsoever. Furthermore, they make a wild accusation against God's messengers, who have always stated the truth, clear and simple: "*We said, "God has revealed nothing. You are in total error.*'" (Verse 9)

"*Thus they shall confess their sins. Far be the inhabitants of the blazing fire [from God's mercy].*" (Verse 11) This is a prayer made by God against them. This after they have acknowledged their guilt, at a time and place they denied would ever occur. Prayer by God denotes a judgement. Thus, they are far removed from God's mercy. They cannot hope for forgiveness or exemption from punishment. They dwell in the blazing fire. What a fate!

Such torment in the blazing fire that draws its breath as it boils is truly fearsome. God does not treat anyone unfairly. We think – but God knows best – that a person who denies his Lord, when God has instilled the truth of faith and its evidence in his very nature, is one that is devoid of all goodness. Such a person deprives himself of every quality that gives him a position in this universe. He is like the stones that are the fuel of hell. He ends up in the middle of the fire, with no hope of reprieve.

The one who denies God during his life on earth sinks further every day into the darkness of disbelief, until he ends up in an ugly shape, derived from hell. It is so ugly an image that it is unlike anything else in this universe. Everything in the universe has a believing soul that extols God's praises. In everything and every creature there is this element of goodness and this tie which pulls it towards the centre of existence, with the exception of those unbelievers who run loose, severing their ties with the rest of the universe, rebelling against all standards and values. Where will they end up in this universe when they have no bond with anything in it? They can only end up in hell, which rages in fury against

them. They have deprived themselves of all right, meaning and dignity. Hence, in hell they receive none.

It is customary in the Qur'ān to portray images of the Day of Judgement in two contrasting scenes. Hence, we now have a scene showing the believers as compared with the unbelievers. In this way, we have the full meaning of the statement at the *sūrah*'s outset: "*He may put you to a test to show who of you is best in conduct.*" (Verse 2) Having mentioned the test, the *sūrah* completes its account by speaking of the reward: "*Those who stand in awe of their Lord although He is beyond the reach of human perception will have forgiveness and a rich reward.*" (Verse 12)

The phrase '*beyond the reach of human perception*' expresses the meaning of the Qur'ānic word *ghayb*. In its use in this verse it includes their fear of God whom they have never seen, as well as their fear of Him when they are alone, unseen by any human eye. Both are fine qualities, reflecting a pure feeling and a profound understanding which together qualify a person to receive what the *sūrah* expresses in general terms as "*forgiveness and a rich reward.*"

To watch God when one is alone, unseen by any other human being is the gauge of a heart's sensitivity and the quality that keeps conscience alive. Anas ibn Mālik reports that some of the Prophet's Companions said to him: "Messenger of God! When we are with you we are at a certain standard, but when we depart we are at a different one." He asked: "How do you feel with regard to your Lord?" They answered: "God is our Lord in secret and open situations." He said: "Yours is not a case of hypocrisy." The bond of God is, then, the essential criterion. Once it is firm in one's heart, one is a true believer.

All in the Open

This last verse provides a bridge linking what precedes it with what comes after. It emphasizes God's knowledge of everything, whether it is said in public or private. He, thus, challenges mankind. It is He who created them and He who knows their inner souls:

> *Whether you keep your words secret or state them openly, He has full knowledge of what is in all hearts. How could it be that He who has*

created should not know all? He is indeed Most Gracious, All-Aware. (Verses 13–14)

They are told they can say what they like, in whatever way they like; it is all equally known to God, for He knows what is concealed deeper even than secrets. "*He has full knowledge of what is in all hearts.*" (Verse 13) Even those thoughts that are kept deep within one's breast, unexpressed, are also known to Him. It is He who created these thoughts, just as He created the breasts that keep them. "*How could it be that He who has created should not know all?*" (Verse 14) The One who has created them must surely know all about them. "*He is indeed Most Gracious, All-Aware.*" (Verse 14) His knowledge encompasses every little detail and every hidden feeling and thought.

Yet people try to hide themselves from God, by making a move here, keeping a secret there or by hiding their intentions. How ludicrous! Their minds in which they try to hide their intentions, are created by God, and He knows all their pathways and hidden corners. Indeed, the intentions they seek to hide are also God's creation; He knows how they are formulated and where they are lodged. So, what can people hide, and where will they turn to?

The Qur'ān makes sure of instilling this truth in people's minds because this gives them the correct understanding. Additionally, it keeps people alert and conscious of God, able to fulfil the trust believers are assigned in this world. This is the trust of faith, maintaining justice and dedication to God in both action and intention. Such understanding cannot be achieved until we clearly realize that we, our hearts and minds, our secrets and intentions, are all of God's creation; it is all fully known to Him. When a believer attains such realization, he purges his heart of bad intentions and fleeting thoughts just as he keeps his open behaviour and expressed statements on the right track. He deals with God in all situations, public or private, open or secret.

Mankind's Abode

The *sūrah* now refers to the earth, which God has created for man to live on. He smoothed it and provided in it all the means that enable it to support human life:

He it is who has made the earth easy to live upon. Go about, then, in all its highlands and eat of His provisions. To Him you will be resurrected. (Verse 15)

Man has lived long on earth finding it easy to settle upon, walk along and utilize its potentials – including its soil, water, air, minerals and all other natural resources. Hence, people forget God's blessing as He made the earth easy for them to live on and to benefit by what it contains. The *sūrah* reminds them of this great blessing, putting it before their eyes, in a fine expression that everyone, regardless of when do they live, can understand according to their knowledge of the earth and its potentials.

The description of the earth as easy to live upon meant for those generations of old the surface of the earth and its being smoothed out so that people and animals could walk upon it, and boats could sail through its seas. It also meant for them that it has been made suitable for cultivation and harvest, and given the sorts of atmosphere, water and soil to make life possible. These, however, are general notions. Scientific discoveries, up to the present day, provide further details that give a much broader sense to this Qur'ānic statement.

The Arabic term used in the *sūrah* to describe the earth as 'easy to live upon' is *dhalūl*, which is normally used to describe an animal that is 'broken' so that man can use it as a mount. Science tells us that use of this term is apt, because the earth which we see as stable and motionless is nonetheless certainly moving. What is more is that it is running at a fast pace, without stopping. Nevertheless, it is broken so as not to throw off its rider and not to trample him as it goes along. It does not shake him as it moves, but rather gives him an easy ride. Moreover, it is just like a mount that produces milk, yielding much.

The earth, this mount man rides, revolves at a speed of 1,000 miles per hour, and, at the same time, moves in its orbit around the sun at a speed of approximately 65,000 miles per hour. Furthermore, the earth, the sun and the solar system travel in space at a speed of around 20,000 miles per hour. Despite such speedy movements, man stays in perfect comfort and stability on the earth's surface. Nothing tears him apart, nor

are his belongings thrown in the air. Indeed, he suffers neither dizziness nor concussion. Instead, he remains firmly on his mount.

These three movements have a definite purpose. We know the effect of two of these movements on human life, and on life on earth in general. As the earth revolves, the day and night alternate. Had night been the permanent condition, all life on earth would have been frozen out. By contrast, a permanent day condition would result in everything being burnt. The earth's orbiting of the sun causes the four seasons we enjoy each year. Had any of these seasons been permanent, life would not have been possible in the form God has willed. We have not as yet discovered the purpose of the third movement in the solar system, but it must relate to the overall harmony clearly noticeable in the universe.

Despite these three exceedingly fast movements, this broken mount, the earth, maintains the same position defined by the position of its axis at an angle of 23.5 degrees. This position of the earth's axis is instrumental in producing, along with the earth's orbit, the four seasons. A change in the axis angle would disrupt the cycle of the four seasons. Yet maintaining this cycle is essential for the life of plants, and indeed for all life on earth.

God has made the earth easy for man to live upon by giving it a gravity which keeps people steady and in balance, while it makes its three speedy movements. He also determined the degree of its atmospheric pressure to make man's overall movement easy. Had this pressure been heavier, man would have found moving about much harder, or even impossible, depending on the level of such pressure. For certain, heavy atmospheric pressure would either hinder man's movement or crush him completely. Had it been lighter, man's movement would have lacked stability. Indeed, he would have suffered implosions within his body, because his body pressure would be high in relation to the atmospheric pressure: this does indeed sometimes happen to those who climb to high altitudes.

Furthermore, God has stretched the surface of the earth, giving it its soft soil. Had its surface been made of hard rock, as scientific theories suppose should have been the case following the earth's cooling and hardening, walking on its surface would have been very difficult,

and it would not have produced any plant life. Rain, wind and other atmospheric elements managed to crush this solid surface so as to form, by God's will, this fertile soil, allowing plant life to flourish for the benefit of man and animal alike. God also made the air above the earth's surface, putting in it the elements necessary for life in all their accurate proportions. Had these proportions been different, life would have been disturbed, even been impossible. Oxygen constitutes 21% of the element air, while nitrogen forms 78% of it. The remainder is made up of carbon monoxide at a rate of 3 portions out of 10,000, as well as other elements. These are the exact proportions vital for supporting life on earth. In addition, thousands of other correlations have been established by God so as to make life on earth possible. These include the sizes of the earth, the sun and the moon, the distance between these three, the level of the sun's temperature, the thickness of the earth's crust, its speed, the angle of its axis, the proportion of sea water to dry land, the density of air covering it, and so forth. Maintaining all these together is what 'breaks' the earth, making it ready to support life, allowing it to produce sustenance and enabling life in general, and human life in particular, to flourish.

The *sūrah* refers to these facts so that they are understood and appreciated by every individual and every generation as they are able to do so, and as their levels of knowledge and observation put before them. Thus, they realize that God's hand, in which all dominion rests, takes care of them and of all around them, makes the earth easy for them to live upon, keeping them and the earth safe and secure. Should this divine care be withheld for just one moment, the whole universe would reel [illegible] of control, leading to its destruction along with all those living on it.

When man's heart is alert to this great fact, God, the Creator, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful, allows him to go about wherever he wishes, and to eat of His provisions: "*He it is who has made the earth easy to live upon. Go about, then, in all its highlands and eat of His provisions.*" (Verse 15) Permission to go about the highlands incorporates walking along its plains and valleys. When the more difficult enterprise is allowed, the easier one goes without saying. The provisions available on earth

are all of God's creation and belong to Him. What God has provided is much wider in its significance than what we understand from the term 'provision', even when it is used in the plural form. It does not refer to the money one has in hand to pay for one's needs and enjoyments. Rather, it refers to everything God has placed on the earth that man can use to earn something that contributes to his livelihood. Essentially, these are part of the earth's composition of the elements that are present in their relative proportions, as also the ability God gave to plant, animal and man to use these elements and benefit by them:

> As is well known, all vegetable life is dependent upon the almost infinitesimal quantity of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere which, so to speak, it breathes. To express this complicated photosynthetic chemical reaction in the simplest possible way, the leaves of the trees are lungs and they have the power when in the sunlight to separate this obstinate carbon dioxide into carbon and oxygen. In other words, the oxygen is given off and the carbon retained and combined with the hydrogen of the water brought up by the plant from its roots. By magical chemistry, out of these elements nature makes sugar, cellulose, and numerous other chemicals, fruits and flowers. The plant feeds itself and produces enough more to feed every animal on earth. At the same time, the plant releases the oxygen we breathe and without which life would end in five minutes. So, all the plants, the forests, the grasses, every bit of moss, and all else of vegetable life, build their structure principally out of carbon and water. Animals give off carbon dioxide and plants give off oxygen. If this interchange did not take place, either the animal or the vegetable life would ultimately use up practically all the oxygen or all of the carbon dioxide, and the balance, being completely upset, one would wilt or die and the other would quickly follow. It has recently been discovered that carbon dioxide in small quantities is also essential to most animal life, just as plants use some oxygen.
>
> Hydrogen must be included, although we do not breathe it. Without hydrogen water would not exist, and the water content

> of animal and vegetable matter is surprisingly great and absolutely essential.[1]

Nitrogen also plays an important part in the provisions the earth yields:

> Without nitrogen in some form not a food plant could grow. One way in which nitrogen can get into the soil is through the activities of certain bacteria which inhabit the roots of leguminous plants, such as clover, peas, beans, and many others. These bacteria take atmospheric nitrogen and turn it into combined nitrogen, and when the plant dies some of this combined nitrogen is left in the soil. Another way in which nitrogen gets into the soil is through thunderstorms. Whenever a flash of lightening rushes through the atmosphere, it combines a very small quantity of the oxygen with the nitrogen and the rain brings it to the earth as combined nitrogen.[2]

Thus nitrogen is brought down in the form plant life can absorb. Plants cannot absorb pure nitrogen as it exists in the air.

Solid and liquid metals buried inside the earth are other types of provisions resulting from the way the earth was formed and the conditions it went through. We need not go into any details here. All we say is that the Arabic term *rizq*, or provisions, appears, in the light of our brief discussion, to be wider in scope and significance than what people normally associate with this word. It is more significantly related to the way the earth is made and to the design of the universe as a whole. When God has permitted mankind to eat of it, He has granted them the facility to make use and partake of it and of the earth as a whole: "*Go about, then, in all its highlands and eat of His provisions.*" (Verse 15)

This is, however, all limited to a period of time known only to God as He set the time allowed for testing people through life and death. It

1. Morrison, A. Cressy (1959), *Man Does Not Stand Alone*, Kingswood, Surrey: The World's Work (1913) Ltd., pp. 31–33.

2. Ibid., p. 35.

is further confined to all that God makes available for man in this life. When the time of the test is over, death occurs, ushering in what comes after it: "*To Him you will be resurrected.*" (Verse 15) To Him, certainly. It is He who has the dominion over the universe, and with Him all refuge lies. He is able to accomplish anything. If not to Him, to whom would resurrection be?

When the Earth is Shaken

At this moment, as they are safe on the face of the earth that has been made easy to live upon, and as they enjoy all this ease that flows by God's leave, this stable earth is shaken violently from under their feet. They feel it quake. The atmosphere surrounding them is suddenly disturbed and a whirlwind engulfs them, hitting their faces and breasts. All this takes place so that they wake up, look up to heaven, try to discern what is in the realm beyond, and be watchful of what God's will may bring about:

> *Do you feel secure that He who is in heaven will not cause the earth to swallow you up when it quakes? Or do you feel secure that He who is in heaven will not let loose against you a sandy whirlwind. You will come to know the truth of My warning. Those who lived before them also disbelieved. How terrible was My rejection of them?* (Verses 16–18)

The people who live on earth enjoying the way it has been smoothed out for their living and who take out of its wealth of resources what they need, realize that it may at times become rebellious, hard for man's living. This takes place when God permits a small disturbance of its system, and things on its surface are severely shaken or destroyed. Whatever happens to be on the surface quakes and can no longer hold its place. We see this when earthquakes occur or volcanoes erupt, revealing an unwieldy beast within the broken mount. Yet God reins it in so that its violent rebellion is brought swiftly under control. It rebels merely for a few seconds, but this is enough to bring about destruction to the structures man has built on its surface; or it may open its mouth to swallow a whole portion of its surface. When it quakes, people are simply helpless, unable to do anything to stop it. In the face of earthquakes, volcanoes

and earth subsidence, people run about aimlessly, like terrified mice in a cage. Yet only seconds before, they were enjoying themselves, oblivious to the Supreme Power that holds everything in place.

People have also experienced whirlwinds, tornadoes and hurricanes that cause much destruction and fire. They can do little to protect themselves against these. When such a storm blows fiercely, hitting faces and breasts with the sand it carries, carrying away with it whatever is in its way, man is clearly powerless, helpless, unless God reins it in.

The Qur'ān reminds people who have long felt secure in their life on earth that such events can always come about and that they can do nothing to stop or control them. Therefore, a telling warning is issued to them: "*You will come to know the truth of My warning.*" (Verse 17) Examples are cited for them from the history of ancient, unbelieving communities: "*Those who lived before them also disbelieved. How terrible was My rejection of them?*" (Verse 18) God rejected that those people of old should disbelieve. He now asks the present unbelievers: "*How terrible was My rejection of them?*" (Verse 18) They were fully aware of how terrible it was. The ruins and other traces of destruction were vivid evidence of how terrible His scourge was.

Moreover, the sense of security that God objects to is that which makes people oblivious of Him, His will and power. This is not the same as the sense of reassurance that believers have about His care and compassion being granted. The two are totally different. A believer always has trust in his Lord, praying for His grace and bounty, but this does not lead him to forgetfulness or to thoughtless indulgence of the earth's pleasures. On the contrary, it makes him always alert, wary that he may incur God's displeasure, keen to avoid any adversity that His will may bring about. Yet, at the same time, he willingly submits himself to God, reassured of His mercy.

'Ā'ishah reports: "I never saw God's Messenger laughing heartily so as to be able to see the inside of his mouth. He only smiled. When God's Messenger saw clouds gathering or felt a wind, he would look worried. I said to him: 'Messenger of God! When people see clouds, they are pleased, hoping that they bring them rain; yet I see you worried when you see clouds gathering.' He said: 'What would assure me, 'Ā'ishah, that it would not bring suffering? People in the past were punished by

means of storms. Others saw the suffering about to overtake them, yet they thought that it was clouds bringing rain'." [Related by Aḥmad, al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] Such is the alertness to what God's will may bring, and the lesson to be learnt from the stories mentioned in the Qur'ān. This does not, however, contradict the feeling of reassurance that God's grace and bounty can always be bestowed.

Besides, this is all part of attributing all apparent causes to the main one. The decision in all matters belongs to the One in whose hand rests all dominion. He has power over all things. Avalanches, sandy whirlwinds, tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes, volcanoes and other natural forces and phenomena are in no way subject to man; they are totally controlled by God. All that people say about these are merely attempts to explain how they occur. They cannot intervene in bringing them about or in preventing their occurrence. All that they can build on the earth's surface may be wiped out in just a moment, like a house of cards, whether by an earthquake or a hurricane. Hence, they better turn to the Creator of the universe, who has set its laws in operation and who placed in it the forces that occasionally manifest in such events. They should look up to the heavens, the symbol of exaltation, and remember the Sovereign to whom all dominion belongs.

Man's power extends to the limit God has given him. By the same token, knowledge extends by the measure God has assigned man. The controls of this great universe are in the hand of its Creator who has set its laws and powers. These powers operate in accordance with His laws and according to His will. What happens to man as a result of these and what he knows of them are set according to a particular measure. Universal events may at times put man in a position of helplessness towards these great powers. Then, he can do nothing more than remember the Creator and Controller of all these forces and powers, looking up to Him for help, and praying to Him to enable him to use what he can of them.

When man forgets this truth, deluded by what God has granted him of knowledge and ability to use some of these natural forces and powers, he becomes a small creature, isolated from true knowledge that elevates his soul to its sublime origin. He is then attached to the earth, alienated from the rest of the universe. By contrast, a scientist who believes in God

submits with the universe to the Almighty Creator, enjoying a sense of happiness that no one experiences except by God's will.

However, the great forces of nature bring man forcibly into a position of helplessness when he can do nothing other than submit to God, whether he is allowed to enjoy such a sense of happiness or be deprived of it. Man may make discoveries, produce inventions, and acquire much power, yet when he faces the great power of nature, he stands helpless. He may be able to protect himself from a hurricane, but the hurricane will take its course and man cannot stop it. All that his knowledge and planning can achieve is sometimes to enable him to move away from its course. Yet, at times, the hurricane will kill him even though he hides within strong walls. At sea, when a hurricane gathers force, man's largest and best built ships are no more than a doll facing a whirlwind. Earthquakes and volcanoes, on the other hand, remain the same as they have always been. It is only blindness that make some miserable individuals assert that man stands alone in the universe, or that he is the master of the universe.

It is by God's will that man has been assigned trusteeship over the earth, and given the power, ability and knowledge he needs for this task. It is God who takes care of him, and gives him his provisions. Should God abandon him, he would be crushed by even the smallest forces placed at his disposal. Flies, and even smaller creatures, would eat him. It is only by God's care that he is protected and honoured. He should know from where he derives his honour and who bestows on him such great bounty.

An Invitation to Reflect

This strong warning now gives way to a call to reflect on something that man often sees but rarely considers and contemplates. It is yet another aspect of God's great design of creation and of His limitless power:

> *Do they not see the birds above them, spreading their wings and drawing them in? None but the Lord of Grace holds them up. He sees everything.* (Verse 19)

This is a miracle that takes place at every moment, yet because of its familiarity we tend to overlook its testimony of God's great power. Yet, look at the birds: how they spread their wings and then draw them in, but in both situations remain airborne, floating easily and smoothly. Moreover, at times, they make certain movements that appear to be for show, adding beauty to their flight, rising high or diving down at speed. Neither eye nor heart tires of looking at this scene and following each type of bird perform their characteristic movements. It is certainly an enjoyment that invites contemplation of God's beautiful creation. We see here how beauty and perfection go hand in hand.

The *sūrah* first suggests that people should look at this beautiful sight: "*Do they not see the birds above them, spreading their wings and drawing them in?*" (Verse 19) It follows this with a clear indication of God's perfect design: "*None but the Lord of Grace holds them up.*" God holds them up by the laws of nature He has set in operation, maintaining a high standard of harmony that is apparent in all creatures, large and small. To achieve such harmony, every little cell or particle is taken into account. These laws of nature ensure that aspects of balance are set in place, in their thousands, on the earth's surface, in the air and in the shape of birds. Thus, this miracle is achieved and it continues to replicate itself with perfect regularity.

God, the Lord of Grace, holds them up in position with His infinite power that admits no weakening and with His care that never loses sight of His creation. It is His will that keeps the laws of nature working regularly, accurately and harmoniously. Thus, they never slow down even for a wink unless God wills otherwise: "*None but the Lord of Grace holds them up.*" The way this statement is phrased suggests that God's hand holds every bird and every wing in the air, whether the bird is spreading its wings out or drawing them in.

"*He sees everything.*" (Verse 19) He sees them all, knows every minute detail about them, coordinates matters and takes care of every little thing, at every moment. Holding the birds in the air is the same as holding the creatures that walk on earth as it moves in its orbit. It is the same method by which God holds all celestial bodies in place. Who could hold them in position other than God? The *sūrah,* however, presents for us a scene

that we see at all times, allowing its message to touch our hearts. If we look carefully, we realize that everything God makes is miraculous and truly inspirational. Every heart and every generation can feel and see of this miraculous truth what they can understand.

Who Else?

The next verse, however, returns unbelievers to fear. Thus they alternate between feelings of fear and admiration of God's creation:

> *What army is there to come to your aid, except for the Lord of Grace? The unbelievers are truly lost in self-delusion.* (Verse 20)

They have been warned lest they be swallowed up by the earth or be overwhelmed by a sandy whirlwind, and they have been reminded of the fate of earlier communities whom God rejected for their disbelief. Now the *sūrah* asks them: who other than He can give them protection against Him? Who can ward off His might other than the Lord of Grace Himself? "*The unbelievers are truly lost in self-delusion.*" Such self-delusion gives them the false feeling of safety and security. They rely on this false sense of security at the very moment they are exposed to His might. They have neither faith nor good action to put forward in support of any plea for mercy from the Lord of Grace.

Next, the *sūrah* mentions the provisions they enjoy but the source of which they overlook. They do not fear that this might be withheld, but instead continue to behave arrogantly:

> *Who will provide for you, if He were to withhold His provision? Yet they persist in their arrogance and in rebellion.* (Verse 21)

As we have already said, all people's provisions come, first and foremost, by God's will and the way He designed the universe and made the earth and the atmosphere as they are. All these factors are absolutely beyond mankind's control and cannot be influenced in any way by them. They predate man's creation. They are more powerful than man, and are better able to erase all traces of life as and when God

so wills. Who, then, will provide for mankind, should God withdraw water, or withhold air from them, or indeed any of the elements that are essential for life?

Included under this broad and profound sense of provisions are all the meanings that readily spring to mind when the term is used, and which man tends to treat as of his own making, such as work, invention and production. All these are closely linked to primary causes on the one hand and are dependent on what God grants to individuals and communities on the other. Every breath a worker draws and every movement he makes is part of God's provisions. Is He not the One who originated him, gave him all his abilities and powers, created for him the breath he draws in and the substance that is consumed by his body enabling movement? Every mental endeavour man makes is part of God's provision. Is He not the Creator who gave man the ability to think and invent? Besides, what can anyone produce unless he uses a substance initially made by God, and utilizes natural and human factors provided by Him? "*Who will provide for you, if He were to withhold His provision?*" (Verse 21)

"*Yet they persist in their arrogance and in rebellion.*" (Verse 21) Having established the nature of the provisions people have and made it clear that mankind are totally dependent on God for all this, the *sūrah* paints a picture of people bearing themselves in total arrogance. All arrogance is ugly, but its ugliest form is that demonstrated by those who are dependent on the One who gives them their food, clothing and all that they have. Indeed, they have nothing other than what He bestows on them; yet they persist in their haughty arrogance.

This is indeed a very true picture of those who turn away from the divine message in arrogant rebellion, forgetting that God is their Maker and that they can only survive by His grace. They control nothing whatsoever of their lives or their provisions.

What Guidance?

On top of all this, they described the Prophet and those who followed him as having gone astray, claiming that they were better guided than them. The same is levelled at the advocates of faith by unbelievers in

every community. Therefore, the *sūrah* paints a true to life image of the status of both parties: "*Is he who goes grovelling on his face better guided than the one who walks upright on a straight path?*" (Verse 22) The one who grovels on his face is either someone who actually walks on his face instead of the right way using his feet and legs, or is someone who trips as he walks, falling on his face. He then lifts himself up only to trip again. Both are miserable conditions, beset with affliction and hardship. Neither leads to proper guidance or goodness. How far removed such conditions are from that of one who walks upright, steady along a way that is free of pitfalls and crookedness, fully aware of the goal towards which he moves.

The first is the situation of a miserable person who has deviated from God's way and, as such, become deprived of His guidance. He is on a collision course with God's laws and creatures, taking up a way different from theirs. Therefore, he is always falling and tripping, tired and lost. The second situation is that of a happy person, benefiting by God's guidance and enjoying travelling along the way charted by believers who always glorify and praise Him. Thus, he joins the procession of the entire universe and of all living and inanimate creatures.

The life of faith is that of ease, straightforwardness and clear objectives. By contrast, the life of disbelief is marked by hardship and error. Which, then, is better guided? Does the question require an answer? It is a rhetorical question, designed to drive its message home.

Both question and answer fade away, giving way to a moving image in which we see two groups of people. The first either grovel or fall on their faces, lacking a goal or charted line. The second group walk with their heads held high. They are steady of step, following a straight path that takes them to a set destination.

In connection with following guidance or error, the *sūrah* reminds people of the means God has provided for them and the faculties of understanding He has equipped them with, yet still they do not put these to good use:

> *Say: It is He who has brought you into being, and given you hearing, sight and hearts. Yet seldom are you thankful.* (Verse 23)

The truth that man was originated by God presses hard on the human mind. It affirms itself in a way that is hard to refute. Man exists in a world in which he is the highest and noblest species known to him. Among all creatures, mankind are equipped with the highest knowledge and the most extensive abilities. Man has not created himself. There must be, then, someone higher, nobler, more able and more knowledgeable than him who brought him into existence. Man must inevitably acknowledge this truth: his very existence puts it before his eyes. To continue trying to deny it is both unworthy and futile.

The *sūrah* mentions this truth here in order to add a reminder about the means of learning, which God has equipped man with: "*Say: It is He who has brought you into being, and given you hearing, sight and hearts.*" How does man receive such great favours and blessings: "*Yet seldom are you thankful.*" (Verse 23)

Hearing and sight are two great miracles about which we have learnt some remarkable aspects. 'Heart' is often used in the Qur'ān in reference to the faculty of knowledge acquisition and understanding. This is an even greater and more remarkable miracle about which we only know very little. It is one of God's secrets in man's creation. Science has made significant attempts to understand the nature of hearing and sight, and here it is perhaps useful to mention briefly some of its findings:

> The hearing system begins with the outer ear, but only God knows where it ends. Science says that sound vibration is carried through the air which directs its entry through the auditory canal to the eardrum, which then transmits it to the labyrinth inside the ear. The labyrinth includes the cochlea and semicircular canals. In the cochlea part there are four thousand minute arches connected to the auditory nerve. Can we imagine the length and size of these arches, and how each of these thousands of arches is fitted in place? What space do they occupy? Yet in this hardly visible labyrinth there are some tiny bones. The ear contains 100,000 hearing cells. The hair cells trigger nerve impulses. Such microscopic accuracy in organization is most amazing.[3]

3. Nawfal, Abd al-Razzaq, (n.d.), *Allah wal-'Ilm al-Ḥadīth*, Cairo, p. 57.

> The central part of the visual system is the eye, which includes 130 million light receptors... The eye consists of the sclera, the cornea, the choroid and the retina and a large number of tiny nerves and canals.[4]
>
> The retina is composed of nine separate layers, all of which together are no thicker than thin paper. The inmost layer is made up of rods and cones, which are said to number thirty million rods and three million cones. These are all arranged in perfect relation to each other and to the lens, but, strangely enough, they turn their backs upon the lens and look inward, not outward... The lens of our eye varies in density so that all rays are brought into focus. Man finds this unattainable in any homogeneous substance, such as glass.[5]

'Heart', which is often used in the Qur'ān interchangeably with 'mind', is the quality that makes man what he is. It denotes the faculty of understanding, distinction and knowledge which qualifies man to take charge of the earth and to shoulder the great trust. This is the trust that the heavens, the earth and the mountains feared to bear. It is to believe by choice and to discern guidance by self motivation. It signifies the diligent observance, by will and choice, of the code God has laid down. No one knows the nature of this faculty, or its centre, or whether it is inside or outside the human body. It is a secret God has not given anyone.

Yet despite having all such grace and gifts to fulfil his momentous trust, man is ungrateful to God: "*Yet seldom are you thankful.*" (Verse 23) Man should feel ashamed of himself when he is thus reminded. He does not thank God for all the blessings He has favoured him with. Had man devoted all his life to expressing gratitude to God, it still would not thank Him enough.

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4. Ibid., p. 58.
5. Morrison, op. cit., p. 60.

The Promise Fulfilment

A reminder follows making it clear that God has not created mankind and given them all their distinctive qualities haphazardly, without a definite purpose: it is all for the purpose of initiating life that incorporates a test and then the administering of reward and requital at the end: "*And He it is who caused you to multiply on earth; and to Him you shall be gathered.*" (Verse 24)

The Arabic term *dhar'*, used in the verse to denote multiplication also signifies 'spreading far and wide', which provides a contrast in both image and meaning with the second action of gathering. The *sūrah* gives both images in a short verse so as to present these vividly before our eyes. Thus, people who have spread all over the earth will realize that they are moving towards an end that brings them all together for an ultimate purpose: one that brings the test of life and death to its final goal.

The *sūrah* then mentions their doubts concerning this promised gathering: "*They say: 'When is this promise to be fulfilled, if what you say be true?'*" (Verse 25) Such a question is put only by one who is in serious doubt or one who is in stubborn denial. Knowing the exact time of the fulfilment of the promise adds nothing to its truth. It has nothing to do with the fact that it is the time appointed for requital after the test has been completed. It is the same to them whether it takes place tomorrow or after millions of years. What is certain is that it is going to happen. Then they will be gathered to receive what they deserve for what they have done in their lives.

God has not imparted knowledge of the Day of Judgement to anyone of His creatures, because such knowledge serves none of their interests. Indeed, imparting such information is against the very nature of this day and has no bearing on the duties people are asked to fulfil in preparation for it. On the contrary, withholding such information from all creatures and keeping it with God Almighty is an act of wisdom that serves human interests. Hence the answer: "*Say: God alone has knowledge of this. I am only a plain warner.*" (Verse 26)

This answer clearly reflects the great difference between the Creator and His creation. God is seen in His absolute oneness: no one bears any similarity to Him and He has no partner. All knowledge belongs to

Him alone. All creatures, including prophets and angels, stand before Him in complete humility: "*Say: God alone has knowledge of this. I am only a plain warner.*" I have a mission and a task, to warn and to make things plain. Knowledge belongs solely to the All-Knowing.

We see them here putting forward questions that imply doubts and being given firm and decisive answers. The *sūrah* then presents an image depicting the subject of their questioning, this day has now arrived. The promise they have seriously doubted is fulfilled and they face it here and now: "*When they see it close at hand, the unbelievers' faces will be stricken with grief, and it will be said: 'This is what you were calling for.'*" (Verse 27) Here is this day that you have always claimed will never take place; it is staring you in the face.

The Qur'ān often uses this method of painting in the present what is to happen in future. The purpose is to counter the state of doubt with an element of surprise. The doubter is shown a scene of something happening which he has denied will ever happen. But it is a true image. This day is present in God's knowledge. The time gap separating it from us is true in relation to us. This is a relative matter that does not represent the plain truth of this day as it is in God's sight. If God wills, they will see it now as it is in His knowledge. Thus, what the *sūrah* does, moving suddenly from this present life to that of the hereafter, and from the attitude of doubt to suddenly facing the truth represents a reality that, had God so willed, they would see now. The *sūrah* paints this reality in a clear and effective way.

Awaiting the Prophet's Death

The unbelievers hoped that the Prophet and the small group that followed him would soon perish, thereby ridding them of a problem that caused much anxiety. They counselled each other to persist until he so died, when they would be able to patch things up and resume their life as before. Sometimes they voiced the claim that God would take Muḥammad and his followers away because they were in error, fabricating lies against God! Hence, as the *sūrah* puts before them the scene of gathering and requital [illegible] the Day of Judgement, it alerts them to the fact that even if their wish were fulfilled, they would not be

immune from facing the consequences of their disbelief. Therefore, it is far better for them to be well prepared for this appointed day, shown to them as though it were taking place there and then:

> *Say: Just think: whether God destroys me and those who follow me, or bestows mercy upon us, who will protect the unbelievers from painful suffering?* (Verse 28)

They will be well advised to think of their own situation and their own future. What benefit would accrue to them if the Prophet and his followers died? Likewise, should God bestow His mercy on the Prophet and his followers, this would not by itself protect the unbelievers from their inevitable fate. God, who let them multiply on earth and who will eventually gather them, is eternal. He never dies. Yet the *sūrah* does not say to them, 'who will protect you from suffering?' It does not specify that they are unbelievers. It simply tells them of the painful suffering that awaits unbelievers. This is a wise approach, instilling fear in their hearts on the one hand, and on the other giving them the chance to review their situation. Had the *sūrah* described them as unbelievers and that they would be certain to suffer painful punishment, they might have retorted with outright rejection and stubborn insolence. It is often the case that dropping a hint is far more effective than making a blunt statement.

The *sūrah* then outlines the believers' attitude, one based on faith, and how they place their full trust in God, relying on Him. They are very confident, assured that they are on the right course, well guided, and that the unbelievers are in manifest error:

> *Say: He is the Lord of Grace: in Him we believe, and in Him we place our trust. You will come to know who is in manifest error.* (Verse 29)

That God is mentioned here by His great attribute, the Lord of Grace, refers to His profound and infinite mercy which He grants to His Messenger and the believers who follow him. He will not destroy them as the unbelievers wish He would.

The *sūrah* instructs the Prophet to highlight the bonds they have with their Lord, the Lord of Grace. The first is the bond of faith, "*in*

Him we believe," and this is followed by one of total reliance, "*and in Him we place our trust.*" The phraseology of this verse suggests a close relation between them and God who favours His Messenger and the believers with the permission to announce this close relationship. Indeed, God instructs the Prophet to announce it, as if He is saying to him: 'Do not be afraid of what the unbelievers say. You and those with you are attached to Me, and you are permitted by Me to declare that you are the recipient of this honour, so announce it to them.' What a great gesture of honour!

This is followed by an implicit warning: "*You will come to know who is in manifest error.*" (Verse 29) This is phrased in such a way that should make them ashamed of their stubborn rejection of the divine faith. It also invites them to review their positions, lest they be the ones who are in complete error. If they are, this inevitably makes them subject to painful suffering, as clearly stated in the previous verse: "*who will protect the unbelievers from painful suffering?*" (Verse 28) At the same time, the *sūrah* does not outrightly brand them as being in error, so as not to harden their attitude. This method of advocacy is one that works well with some people.

The Final Note

The *sūrah* ends with a note that mentions punishment in this present life in the form of depriving the unbelievers of the most essential thing of life, namely, water:

> *Say: Just think: if all your water were to sink underground, who would give you clear flowing water?* (Verse 30)

This is something so close and necessary for people's lives. They should therefore consider this move carefully if they cannot think of the Day of Judgement as certain. All dominion rests in God's hand and He is able to accomplish anything. What will their position be should He will that they be deprived of this most essential life element? They are left to contemplate this unthinkable eventuality, should God will it to happen.

Thus, this *sūrah* concludes, having taken us on a grand tour reaching up to great horizons and profound depths. Almost every verse provides a distinct beat. It can be seen as a journey into the unknown, or indeed into a close, visible world that is often overlooked. It is a grand *sūrah*, much greater than its length or the number of its verses. It is like arrows pointing far into the distance, with each aiming at a separate world.

The *sūrah* addresses a number of very important Islamic concepts. It establishes the truth of God's absolute power and His absolute sovereignty; the trial of death and life as a prelude to resurrection and requital; the beauty and perfection of God's design; His absolute knowledge of secrets and inner thoughts: of God being the source of all provisions; of His guardianship of all His creatures; of His presence with every creature, as well as a number of other truths that are part of a believer's concept of God, the universe and life. It is from this concept that a believer derives his code of living and his attitude towards God, himself, the rest of mankind, living creatures and the universe. It is this concept that shapes a believer's conscience, feelings, personality, values and standards.

SŪRAH 68

Al-Qalam

(The Pen)

Prologue

Time of Revelation

It is practically impossible to date the revelation of this *sūrah*, and this applies to its opening as well as to the *sūrah* as a whole. Nor is it possible to say for certain that its opening was revealed first and the rest after the lapse of some time. We cannot even say that this was more probable, because the opening and the ending of the *sūrah* tackle the same point, namely, the unbelievers' rude claims about the Prophet, denouncing him as a madman.

There are many reports that suggest that this was the second *sūrah* to be revealed after *Sūrah* 96. Where different editions of the Qur'ān mention an order of revelation, they all suggest that this is the second *sūrah*. Yet the style of the *sūrah*, the way it tackles its subject matter and its drift point to something else. In fact, these aspects almost confirm that it was revealed sometime after the call to Islam went public. It is well known that for three years the Prophet addressed his message to people privately, on an individual basis. In other words, this *sūrah* was most probably revealed during that time, when the Quraysh was determinedly opposed to the new message of Islam, resorting to all means to prevent it, including levelling defamatory allegations against the Prophet.

By way of response, the Qur'ān began to denounce such tactics, repelling unfounded allegations and issuing threats and warnings of the type this *sūrah* includes.

As we have said, it has been suggested that only the opening of the *sūrah* was revealed early on, soon after the first revelation of *Sūrah* 96. It is further suggested that the negation of any madness attributed to the Prophet, which occurs in the opening, "*you are not, by your Lord's grace, a madman,*" was in order to calm his own fears about whether such revelations were signs of madness. This is again unlikely, because the reports mentioning any such fears the Prophet may have had are exceedingly lacking in authenticity. Moreover, the way the *sūrah* is built as a single whole makes it clear that this negation is meant to refute the allegation mentioned at its conclusion: "*The unbelievers well-nigh trip you up with their eyes when they hear this reminder. They say, 'He is surely mad.'*" (Verse 51) It is this allegation that is negated at the *sūrah*'s very outset. This is clearly understood when we read all the *sūrah* and appreciate how closely interlinked it is throughout.

Some reports also suggest that certain passages, specifically verses 17–23 and 42–52, were revealed in Madīnah. The first of these passages mentions the test endured by the owners of the garden, and the second refers to the Prophet Jonah. Again, we believe this not to be the case. Instead, we suggest that the whole *sūrah* was revealed in Makkah, because its style is very much Makkan. Indeed, this is more likely, considering the style, the features and the overall unity of the *sūrah*.

Our own stance, therefore, is that the *sūrah* was not the second to be revealed, but rather that its revelation took place after the lapse of some considerable time after the start of the Prophet's mission. It was certainly after the divine instruction was given to the Prophet to "*warn your nearest kindred,*" (26: 214), and after the revelation of a substantial portion of the Qur'ān speaking about earlier communities. Such reports have been described by some unbelievers as 'fables of the ancients'. It was clearly revealed then at a time when the Quraysh had already been called upon to accept Islam and whence it started its resistance to the call. Indeed, so determined had it become in its opposition at this point that it did not hesitate to level false allegations against the

Prophet and his mission. It is such opposition that necessitated the very strong denunciation the *sūrah* makes of the unbelievers and the strong warnings it issues both early on and towards its end. Such timing of its revelation is also confirmed by the last image it portrays: "*The unbelievers well-nigh trip you up with their eyes when they hear this reminder. They say, 'He is surely mad.'*" (Verse 51) This is an image of a public address calling on large groups of people to accept the message. Such gatherings most certainly did not take place during the early years of the Islamic message. Indeed, the first such public address was only made three years after the Prophet began to receive Qur'ānic revelations.

The *sūrah* refers to some of the offers the unbelievers made to the Prophet, suggesting a compromise over the central issue in dispute, namely that of faith. It says: "*They would love that you compromise with them, so that they will also compromise.*" (Verse 9) Needless to say, such an offer would not have been made at a time when the message was only advocated in private, presented to a few individuals. In such circumstances, it would not have been felt to represent any danger. It is more likely that such offers would only have been made later, when the message advocated itself in public and when the unbelievers realized its far-reaching significance.

We see how several indications confirm that the *sūrah* was not revealed in the very early days of the Islamic message, and that at least three years had passed before its revelation. It is highly unlikely that no Qur'ānic revelations were made during these three years. On the contrary, it is much more likely that many *sūrahs* and passages were revealed in the intervening period, presenting the Islamic faith without strongly denouncing the unbelievers in the way we find in this *sūrah*. Having said all this, however, one can still not say that this *sūrah*, as well as *Sūrahs* 73 and 74, were revealed late into the Islamic period.

A Wide Gulf

The tree of the Islamic faith, in its real, clean and pure form, was being planted on earth. It was totally unfamiliar to the prevailing state of ignorance, or *jāhiliyyah*, not only in the Arabian Peninsula but throughout the globe. Indeed there was a great gulf between it and the

deviant and colourless form of the Abrahamic faith, mixed with local superstitions, which the Arab idolaters upheld. What Muḥammad (peace be upon him) advocated was a clear, straightforward, simple, yet comprehensive and profound faith that was fully in line with the original pure faith preached by Abraham, but to a standard of perfection that fits its being the last message to mankind, addressing them in their stage of maturity and remaining intact to the end of time. Take, for example, the notion of multiple deities that assigns partners to God: in this respect, the Arabs worshipped angels, statues, the *jinn* and spirits. Their beliefs were a medley of corrupt and hollow notions. Compare these with the noble picture the Qur'ān paints of God and His majestic power that takes care of every creature. The gulf between the two is immense.

Similarly wide is the gulf between the class system that prevailed in Arabia, the clerical nature of its religion and the monopoly of privileges, such as custodianship of the Ka'bah, on the one hand and the equality of all people preached by Islam and every individual's direct relation with God as explained in the Qur'ān on the other. Likewise, the morality advocated by the Prophet Muḥammad was a world apart from the values that prevailed in Arabia's *jāhiliyyah* society.

This great gulf between the new faith and the Quraysh's beliefs, values and practices was sufficient to bring about direct conflict between the two camps. There were, however, other factors which perhaps were, to the Quraysh, more serious than the issue of faith. There were, for example, social factors, some of which prompted them to suggest what is reported in the Qur'ān: "*They also say, 'Why was not this Qur'ān revealed to some great man of the two cities?'*" (43: 31) The two cities mentioned here are Makkah and Ṭā'if. Despite the fact that the Prophet was a descendent of the noblest family in the Quraysh, the very fact that he was not the chief of his clan made it very difficult for their chiefs to accept his leadership. In that social environment, position in one's clan was of paramount importance.

Family factors also played their part. We see such significance in the fact that 'Amr ibn Hishām, better known as Abū Jahl, stubbornly refused to accept the truth of the Islamic message, despite his being certain of it, because the Prophet preaching it belonged to the 'Abd Manāf clan. This is recounted in the story of Abū Jahl, Abū Sufyān and al-Akhnas ibn

Sharīq who each went out individually, on three consecutive nights, to listen to the Qur'ān being recited by the Prophet. Every morning, they met on their way back home and started blaming each other, pledging that they would never do this again, lest their actions encourage others to listen to the Qur'ān. When al-Akhnas asked Abū Jahl what he thought of what he heard Muḥammad reciting, the latter answered: "We have competed with the clan of 'Abd Manāf for honours: they fed the poor, and we did the same; they provided generous support to those who needed it and we did the same. When we were together on the same level, like two racehorses running neck and neck, they said that one of their number was a Prophet receiving revelations from on high! When can we attain such an honour? By God, we shall never believe in him."[1]

There were also other interests and psychological factors determined to uproot this new tree before it could firmly establish its roots and stretch forth its branches. Such efforts were particularly heightened once the new message had moved on from private and individual advocacy to the open, public stage, outlining the essential features of the new faith, Islam. The Qur'ān spoke in clear terms, showing the absurdity of polytheism and its deviant concepts and traditions.

His position as a Prophet receiving revelations from on high notwithstanding, Muḥammad was a man who experienced normal human feelings. He was at the receiving end of such determined opposition that culminated in an all out fight against him, his message and the small band of his followers. He and his Companions could not help but hear the false allegations the unbelievers levelled at him. "*They say, 'He is surely mad.'*" (Verse 51) This was but one of the many types of ridicule they levelled on him, as is reported in the Qur'ān. Such ridicule, added to the abuse and persecution many of his followers suffered at the hands of their own relatives and clansmen, pained Muḥammad, God's Messenger, greatly.

We see in Makkan *sūrahs* how God bestows His abundant care on His Messenger and this small group of followers, consoling and commending him and those who accepted his message. In this respect, God gives

1. Ibn Hishām, *Al-Sīrah al-Nabawiyyah*, Dar al-Qalam, Beirut, Vol. 1, pp. 337–338. Also, Adil Salahi (2002), *Muhammad: Man and Prophet*, Leicester, The Islamic Foundation, pp. 172–173.

prominence to the moral aspect embodied in the Islamic message and its bearer, Muḥammad (peace be upon him). He refutes what the unbelievers alleged about him. He reassures the persecuted believers that He is on their side, so they do not have to think about their enemies, powerful and wealthy as they may seem.

We find in this *sūrah* many examples of how God comforts and reassures the Prophet: "*Nūn. By the pen, by all they write, you are not, by your Lord's grace, a madman. And indeed you shall have a never-ending reward. Most certainly, yours is a sublime character.*" (Verses 1–4) He also says of the believers: "*For the God-fearing there shall be gardens of bliss with their Lord. Should We treat those who submit themselves to Us as We treat the guilty? What is the matter with you? On what basis do you judge?*" (Verses 34–36) Of one of the Prophet's more prominent enemies, God says: "*Pay no heed to any contemptible swearer, slanderer, going about with defaming tales, hinderer of good, aggressor, sinful, cruel and, on top of all that, given to evil. Just because he has wealth and children, when Our revelations are recited to him, he says, 'Fables of the ancients!' We shall brand him on the snout.*" (Verses 10–16) The Almighty then speaks about the war against those who deny the truth generally: "*Therefore, leave to Me those who deny this revelation. We shall bring them low, step by step, in ways beyond their knowledge. I will allow them more time: My scheme is truly firm.*" (Verses 44–45) This is different from the punishment of the hereafter when the arrogant will be humiliated: "*On the day when matters become so dire, they will be asked to prostrate themselves, but they will not be able to do so. Their eyes will be downcast, with ignominy overwhelming them. They were invited to prostrate themselves when they were safe.*" (Verses 42–43)

The *sūrah* cites the example of those people who had a garden, but were too greedy. This serves as a warning directed against the elders of the Quraysh who, feeling powerful on account of their wealth and families, schemed against the new message, trying to bring it down. At the end, the *sūrah* enjoins the Prophet to remain steadfast in adversity: "*So, await in patience your Lord's judgement; and do not be like the man in the whale...*" (Verse 48)

Through such comforting, praise and reassurance, coupled with fearsome warnings and an uncompromising attack on the unbelievers,

God Himself takes up the fight. We can discern the features of that period when the believers were few, weak, suffering persecution and hardship and facing a determined effort to uproot the tree of their new faith. In the *sūrah*'s style, the words it uses and in its themes we identify certain features of the environment in which the new message functioned. Essentially, it was characterized by naïve concepts, petty concerns, and the lack of any profound thinking.

Such naïvety is seen in the unbelievers' crude methods to counter the Prophet's message. They describe him as a madman, but this is an allegation that lacks even elementary tact. It is crude abuse levelled by uncouth, unrefined and ill-mannered people.

Their naïvety is brought into focus by the way God refutes their false allegations. First of all, the line it takes is the most suited to their own conditions: "*You are not, by your Lord's grace, a madman. And indeed you shall have a never-ending reward. Most certainly, yours is a sublime character. You shall before long see, as they will see, which of you is the one afflicted.*" (Verses 2–6) Secondly, the *sūrah* adds a clear warning: "*So pay no heed to those who deny the truth. They would love that you compromise with them, so that they will also compromise.*" (Verses 8–9) Thirdly, the refutation turns their abusive words against one of their own number: "*Furthermore, pay no heed to any contemptible swearer, slanderer, going about with defaming tales, hinderer of good, aggressor, sinful, cruel and, on top of all that, given to evil.*" (Verses 10–13) Fourthly, the focus increases as the *sūrah* tells the story of those owners of a garden who lacked all refinement despite their wealth. In their arrogance, they whisper to each other that they will make sure that no poor people will be allowed into their garden to disrupt their harvest.

Furthermore, the unbelievers' naïvety is clearly shown in the argument put to them: "*Or have you a divine book which you study, and in which you find that you shall have all that you choose? Or have you received solemn oaths, binding on Us till the Day of Resurrection, that you will get whatever you yourselves decide? Ask them which of them will vouch for this.*" (Verses 37–40)

We see all these features through the expressions used in the *sūrah*. They are of benefit in our study of the events that took place during the Prophet's lifetime and as we follow the progress of the Islamic message.

They explain how the Qur'ān elevated that social environment and the Muslim community towards the end of the Prophet's mission, and how far removed from such crudeness and naïvety the Muslim community became. To appreciate the wide gulf between the two situations we only need to study the mode of address the Qur'ān adopts in speaking to the Muslim community at the time. We need also to look at the changes in the situation of that Muslim community, its concerns, feelings and attitudes brought about within no more than 20 years, a period that is no more than a glance in the life of nations. Such a change in the social fabric of the community was both profound and firmly established, yet accomplished in such a short time. It enabled that community to assume mankind's leadership, attaining at the same time a sublime standard of morality that no other human leadership has ever attained. It was a unique standard in the very nature of the faith it preached, its practical effects on human life, its broad outlook that views all mankind with love and compassion, and its meeting all the community's needs: emotional, intellectual and social.

All in all, the progress so achieved was miraculous, elevating the community from such naïvety to a high standard of refinement and broadness of vision. It was such an enormous transformation that entailed much more than a minority becoming the majority, or the weak becoming strong. Building character and imparting depth to a people's way of thinking are far more difficult than just increasing numbers and marshalling armies.

Al-Qalam (The Pen)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

Nūn. By the pen, by all they write, (1)

نٓ وَٱلْقَلَمِ وَمَا يَسْطُرُونَ ﴿١﴾

you are not, by your Lord's grace, a madman. (2)

مَآ أَنتَ بِنِعْمَةِ رَبِّكَ بِمَجْنُونٍ ﴿٢﴾

And indeed you shall have a never-ending reward. (3)

وَإِنَّ لَكَ لَأَجْرًا غَيْرَ مَمْنُونٍ ﴿٣﴾

Most certainly, yours is a sublime character. (4)

وَإِنَّكَ لَعَلَىٰ خُلُقٍ عَظِيمٍ ﴿٤﴾

You shall before long see, as they will see, (5)

فَسَتُبْصِرُ وَيُبْصِرُونَ ﴿٥﴾

which of you is the one afflicted. (6)

بِأَييِّكُمُ ٱلْمَفْتُونُ ﴿٦﴾

Your Lord knows best who has strayed from His path, as He knows the ones who are rightly guided. (7)

إِنَّ رَبَّكَ هُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِمَن ضَلَّ عَن سَبِيلِهِۦ وَهُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِٱلْمُهْتَدِينَ ﴿٧﴾

So pay no heed to those who deny the truth. (8)

فَلَا تُطِعِ ٱلْمُكَذِّبِينَ ﴿٨﴾

وَدُّوا۟ لَوْ تُدْهِنُ فَيُدْهِنُونَ ﴿٩﴾

They would love that you compromise with them, so that they will also compromise. (9)

وَلَا تُطِعْ كُلَّ حَلَّافٍ مَّهِينٍ ﴿١٠﴾

Furthermore, pay no heed to any contemptible swearer, (10)

هَمَّازٍ مَّشَّآءٍۭ بِنَمِيمٍ ﴿١١﴾

slanderer, going about with defaming tales, (11)

مَّنَّاعٍ لِّلْخَيْرِ مُعْتَدٍ أَثِيمٍ ﴿١٢﴾

hinderer of good, aggressor, sinful, (12)

عُتُلٍّۭ بَعْدَ ذَٰلِكَ زَنِيمٍ ﴿١٣﴾

cruel and, on top of all that, given to evil. (13)

أَن كَانَ ذَا مَالٍ وَبَنِينَ ﴿١٤﴾

Just because he has wealth and children, (14)

إِذَا تُتْلَىٰ عَلَيْهِ ءَايَٰتُنَا قَالَ أَسَٰطِيرُ ٱلْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿١٥﴾

when Our revelations are recited to him, he says, 'Fables of the ancients!' (15)

سَنَسِمُهُۥ عَلَى ٱلْخُرْطُومِ ﴿١٦﴾

We shall brand him on the snout. (16)

إِنَّا بَلَوْنَٰهُمْ كَمَا بَلَوْنَآ أَصْحَٰبَ ٱلْجَنَّةِ إِذْ أَقْسَمُوا۟ لَيَصْرِمُنَّهَا مُصْبِحِينَ ﴿١٧﴾

We try them as We tried the owners of a certain garden, who vowed that they would harvest its fruits on the morrow, (17)

وَلَا يَسْتَثْنُونَ ﴿١٨﴾

and made no allowance. (18)

A visitation from your Lord came upon that garden while they were asleep, (19)

فَطَافَ عَلَيْهَا طَآئِفٌ مِّن رَّبِّكَ وَهُمْ نَآئِمُونَ ﴿١٩﴾

so that by morning it was stripped bare and looked desolate. (20)

فَأَصْبَحَتْ كَٱلصَّرِيمِ ﴿٢٠﴾

At daybreak they called out to one another: (21)

فَتَنَادَوْا مُصْبِحِينَ ﴿٢١﴾

'Go early to your tilth if you wish to gather all its fruits.' (22)

أَنِ ٱغْدُوا عَلَىٰ حَرْثِكُمْ إِن كُنتُمْ صَٰرِمِينَ ﴿٢٢﴾

So they went off, whispering to one another, (23)

فَٱنطَلَقُوا وَهُمْ يَتَخَٰفَتُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

'Make sure that no needy person enters the garden today.' (24)

أَن لَّا يَدْخُلَنَّهَا ٱلْيَوْمَ عَلَيْكُم مِّسْكِينٌ ﴿٢٤﴾

Early they went, strongly bent on their purpose. (25)

وَغَدَوْا عَلَىٰ حَرْدٍ قَٰدِرِينَ ﴿٢٥﴾

When they saw it, they exclaimed: 'Surely we have lost our way! (26)

فَلَمَّا رَأَوْهَا قَالُوٓا إِنَّا لَضَآلُّونَ ﴿٢٦﴾

No! We are utterly ruined.' (27)

بَلْ نَحْنُ مَحْرُومُونَ ﴿٢٧﴾

The wisest among them said, 'Did I not tell you, "Will you not extol God's limitless glory?"' (28)

قَالَ أَوْسَطُهُمْ أَلَمْ أَقُل لَّكُمْ لَوْلَا تُسَبِّحُونَ ﴿٢٨﴾

They said, 'Limitless in His glory is our Lord! Truly, we were doing wrong.' (29)

قَالُوا سُبْحَٰنَ رَبِّنَآ إِنَّا كُنَّا ظَٰلِمِينَ ﴿٢٩﴾

Then they turned upon each other with mutual reproach. (30)

فَأَقْبَلَ بَعْضُهُمْ عَلَىٰ بَعْضٍ يَتَلَاوَمُونَ ﴿٣٠﴾

They said: 'Woe betide us! We have done great wrong. (31)

قَالُوا يَا وَيْلَنَا إِنَّا كُنَّا طَاغِينَ ﴿٣١﴾

It may be that our Lord will grant us something better instead. To our Lord we truly turn in hope.' (32)

عَسَىٰ رَبُّنَا أَن يُبْدِلَنَا خَيْرًا مِّنْهَا إِنَّا إِلَىٰ رَبِّنَا رَاغِبُونَ ﴿٣٢﴾

Such is the suffering [in this life], but greater indeed is the suffering in the life to come, if they but knew it. (33)

كَذَٰلِكَ الْعَذَابُ ۖ وَلَعَذَابُ الْآخِرَةِ أَكْبَرُ ۚ لَوْ كَانُوا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٣٣﴾

For the God-fearing there shall be gardens of bliss with their Lord. (34)

إِنَّ لِلْمُتَّقِينَ عِندَ رَبِّهِمْ جَنَّاتِ النَّعِيمِ ﴿٣٤﴾

Should We treat those who submit themselves to Us as We treat the guilty? (35)

أَفَنَجْعَلُ الْمُسْلِمِينَ كَالْمُجْرِمِينَ ﴿٣٥﴾

What is the matter with you? On what basis do you judge? (36)

مَا لَكُمْ كَيْفَ تَحْكُمُونَ ﴿٣٦﴾

Or have you a divine book which you study, (37)

أَمْ لَكُمْ كِتَابٌ فِيهِ تَدْرُسُونَ ﴿٣٧﴾

and in which you find that you shall have all that you choose? (38)

إِنَّ لَكُمْ فِيهِ لَمَا تَخَيَّرُونَ ﴿٣٨﴾

Or have you received solemn oaths, binding on Us till the Day of Resurrection, that you will get whatever you yourselves decide? (39)

أَمْ لَكُمْ أَيْمَٰنٌ عَلَيْنَا بَٰلِغَةٌ إِلَىٰ يَوْمِ ٱلْقِيَٰمَةِ ۙ
إِنَّ لَكُمْ لَمَا تَحْكُمُونَ ﴿٣٩﴾

Ask them which of them will vouch for this. (40)

سَلْهُمْ أَيُّهُم بِذَٰلِكَ زَعِيمٌ ﴿٤٠﴾

Or have they partners? Let them produce their partners, if what they say is true. (41)

أَمْ لَهُمْ شُرَكَآءُ فَلْيَأْتُوا۟ بِشُرَكَآئِهِمْ إِن
كَانُوا۟ صَٰدِقِينَ ﴿٤١﴾

On the day when matters become so dire, they will be asked to prostrate themselves, but they will not be able to do so. (42)

يَوْمَ يُكْشَفُ عَن سَاقٍ وَيُدْعَوْنَ إِلَى
ٱلسُّجُودِ فَلَا يَسْتَطِيعُونَ ﴿٤٢﴾

Their eyes will be downcast, with ignominy overwhelming them. They were invited to prostrate themselves when they were safe. (43)

خَٰشِعَةً أَبْصَٰرُهُمْ تَرْهَقُهُمْ ذِلَّةٌ ۖ وَقَدْ كَانُوا۟
يُدْعَوْنَ إِلَى ٱلسُّجُودِ وَهُمْ سَٰلِمُونَ ﴿٤٣﴾

Therefore, leave to Me those who deny this revelation. We shall bring them low, step by step, in ways beyond their knowledge. (44)

فَذَرْنِى وَمَن يُكَذِّبُ بِهَٰذَا ٱلْحَدِيثِ ۖ
سَنَسْتَدْرِجُهُم مِّنْ حَيْثُ
لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٤٤﴾

I will allow them more time: My scheme is truly firm. (45)

وَأُمْلِى لَهُمْ ۚ إِنَّ كَيْدِى مَتِينٌ ﴿٤٥﴾

Do you [Prophet] demand a payment from them [and so they fear] that they would be burdened with debt? (46)

أَمْ تَسْـَٔلُهُمْ أَجْرًا فَهُم مِّن مَّغْرَمٍ مُّثْقَلُونَ ﴿٤٦﴾

Do they have knowledge of the hidden reality so that they can write it down? (47)

أَمْ عِندَهُمُ ٱلْغَيْبُ فَهُمْ يَكْتُبُونَ ﴿٤٧﴾

So, await in patience your Lord's judgement; and do not be like the man in the whale who called out in distress. (48)

فَٱصْبِرْ لِحُكْمِ رَبِّكَ وَلَا تَكُن كَصَاحِبِ ٱلْحُوتِ إِذْ نَادَىٰ وَهُوَ مَكْظُومٌ ﴿٤٨﴾

Had not grace from his Lord reached him, he would have been left upon that barren shore in a state of disgrace. (49)

لَّوْلَآ أَن تَدَٰرَكَهُۥ نِعْمَةٌ مِّن رَّبِّهِۦ لَنُبِذَ بِٱلْعَرَآءِ وَهُوَ مَذْمُومٌ ﴿٤٩﴾

His Lord, however, chose him and made him one of the righteous. (50)

فَٱجْتَبَٰهُ رَبُّهُۥ فَجَعَلَهُۥ مِنَ ٱلصَّٰلِحِينَ ﴿٥٠﴾

The unbelievers well-nigh trip you up with their eyes when they hear this reminder. They say, 'He is surely mad.' (51)

وَإِن يَكَادُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ لَيُزْلِقُونَكَ بِأَبْصَٰرِهِمْ لَمَّا سَمِعُوا۟ ٱلذِّكْرَ وَيَقُولُونَ إِنَّهُۥ لَمَجْنُونٌ ﴿٥١﴾

Yet it is but a reminder to all mankind. (52)

وَمَا هُوَ إِلَّا ذِكْرٌ لِّلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٥٢﴾

Issues Spelled Out

"*Nūn. By the pen, by all they write.*" (Verse 1) The *sūrah* begins with an oath by God Almighty. The oath is by the letter *nūn*, the pen and writing. The relationship between this letter of the alphabet and the other two, i.e. the pen and writing, is clear. As God swears by these He gives them due importance, highlighting this and presenting it to a community where learning through this approach was not valued. In fact, writing was very rare and primitive in that community while the role it was destined to play required that such ability develop and become widespread. This was the only way through which it could advocate its faith and the systems it laid down for human life. It would then be required to provide wise leadership for humanity. Writing is no doubt a basic element in fulfilling such tasks.

This point is endorsed by the fact that Islamic revelations started with the order to read: "*Read in the name of your Lord who has created – created man out of a germ-cell. Read – for your Lord is the most Bountiful One, Who has taught the use of the pen, taught man what he did not know.*" (96: 1–5) This instruction was given to the unlettered Prophet, whom God in His infinite wisdom willed to be unable to read and write. Yet the revelations vouchsafed to him began with such emphasis on learning through reading and writing with the pen. This importance is reiterated here by the oath using the letter *nūn*, the pen and the writing. All this should be seen as part of the divine system of cultivating the Muslim community and preparing it for the universal role God assigned to it.

God Almighty states this oath by *nūn*, the pen and writing to refute the unbelievers' false allegation. He shows how improbable it is, since it is He who bestowed His grace on His Messenger: "*You are not, by your Lord's grace, a madman.*" (Verse 2) This short verse also identifies God's grace bestowed on the Prophet in an expression that confirms his closeness to Him. At the same time, the verse refutes the alleged condition, one that cannot combine with God's grace bestowed on His chosen servant.

Anyone who studies the Prophet's relations with his people will be utterly astonished that any should level such a description at him. They

knew him to be very wise. Several years before his prophethood, they accepted his arbitration in a dispute over which of their clans should be honoured with placing the Black Stone in its position in the Ka'bah. It was they who nicknamed him *al-Amīn*, meaning the trustworthy. They also continued to deposit their valuables with him for safekeeping, and this despite their fierce enmity towards him and his message, throughout his time in Makkah. Indeed, so trustworthy was the Prophet that he entrusted his cousin, 'Alī, with the task of returning such deposits to them when he migrated to Madīnah. The unbelievers also confirmed that he never told a lie even before the start of his prophethood. Heracules, the Byzantine Emperor, asked Abū Sufyān, the Quraysh leader, whether they ever accused Muḥammad of lying before he became a prophet. Abū Sufyān, who was his sworn enemy at the time, said that they did not. Heracules then said: "He would not refrain from lying to people and then start lying to God."

It is absolutely astounding that the hatred felt by the Quraysh unbelievers was of such a magnitude that they should make allegations of this sort against a noble man distinguished among them by his wisdom and high standards of morality. Yet grudges can blind people to the truth. The perpetrator of such falsehood is the first to know that he is a wicked liar.

This spiteful lie by the unbelievers is countered with a gesture of compassionate honour: "*You are not, by your Lord's grace, a madman.*" (Verse 2) Moreover, "*And indeed you shall have a never-ending reward.*" (Verse 3) This never-ending reward is granted by your Lord who has bestowed on you the honour of prophethood. This gives solace and abundant compensation for any type of isolation or allegation the unbelievers may hurl at him. What loss could be incurred by the one whose Lord kindly and benevolently assures him of a continuing reward, one that never ends?

A Testimony by God

This is followed by a great testimony and abundant honour: "*Most certainly, yours is a sublime character.*" (Verse 4) The whole universe echoes this unique praise of the Prophet. No writer can describe the value of this

great testimony by the Creator of the universe; no imagination can give it its worth. It is a testimony by God, according to His own measure, given to His servant, in His own words: "*Most certainly, yours is a sublime character.*" A sublime character has, according to God's measure, its own unique value which no other creature can imagine.

This testimony confirms Muḥammad's greatness in several ways. First of all, by the fact that it is God's own testimony, given in His majesty, and appreciated by the whole universe and echoed by everyone on high. Secondly, his greatness is seen by virtue of the fact that Muḥammad (peace be upon him) was able to receive God's testimony, live with it and know who was saying it. It was God Almighty, in His absolute power and knowledge, that stated it. The Prophet knew his own position in relation to such absolutely great power. He could appreciate this position as no one else could. The fact that Muḥammad (peace be upon him) held his position firmly as he received this word, from its sublime source, without being crushed by the pressure it brought on him, and that he remained calm and stable is the best evidence of his own greatness.

There are many reports about the Prophet's greatness given by his Companions. Indeed, his practical conduct is better evidence than anything reported about him. However, this testimony, given by God Almighty, is greater still than any reported evidence. God knows best whom to entrust with His final message. Muḥammad, (peace be upon him), in his sublime character, was indeed the one to deliver this message, which is the noblest in history. He was a match for it, and a living example of its greatness. The message of Islam is so perfect, beautiful, comprehensive and truthful that it could only be delivered by a man who deserved such testimony from God, and by one who would receive such divine testimony with confidence. At the same time, however, God remonstrated with the Prophet for some of his actions but all the while imbibing the same confidence and reassurance. He declared both aspects to all people, hiding nothing. In both situations, he was a noble Prophet, an obedient servant and a trusted deliverer of the divine message.

The greatness of Muḥammad (peace be upon him) mirrors the greatness of the Islamic message: both go further in scope than the most powerful telescope can reach. The most that anyone who wants to monitor this dual greatness can do is to look at it without assigning

limits to it, and point to its field in the universe, without setting parameters on it.

Once more I feel the need to stress the broad significance of the fact that the Prophet received this testimony from his Lord and that he remained firm, confident and reassured. He himself, a human being, would praise one of his Companions and that person, as well as those close to him, would feel so excited and overwhelmed with joy. Yet all involved, the one making the statement of praise, the praised person and the ones who heard of it knew that the Prophet was human. It is true that he was a Prophet, yet he remained within the human circle, with its well-known limitations. In his case, the praise came from God Almighty, and he knew of God what no one else could know. Yet he remained firm and continued his mission. How this must have felt is beyond imagination.

It was Muḥammad alone who could attain such a sublime level of greatness and human perfection that matched the spirit God breathed into man. Muḥammad alone matched this ultimate divine message to mankind so that it is reflected in him alive, taking the form of a man. Muḥammad alone was the one God knew to be worthy of this position and further knew that his character was sublime. It was God who declared here His testimony that he had a sublime character, as also declared elsewhere in the Qur'ān that He, the Lord of all the worlds, showered His blessings on him: "*God and His angels bless the Prophet. Believers! Bless him and give him greetings of peace.*" (33: 56) Only God can grant one of His own servants such a great and unique favour.

Emphasis on Morality

We also note here that the moral element is given considerable weight in God's measure. It is a fundamental element in the Islamic message, just as it is fundamental in the Prophet's own character. Indeed, we note its prominence in both. In fact, both legislative and educational aspects of the Islamic message rely on moral values. The strongest emphasis in what it advocates is laid on purity, cleanliness, honesty, truth, justice, mercy, compassion, kindness, fulfilment of promises and commitments, actions matching words and both consistent with

intentions and thoughts. It forbids injustice, dishonesty, cheating, taking other people's property unlawfully, violating other people's rights and honour and spreading immorality in any way or form. Its laws are geared to protecting these principles and safeguarding the moral element in people's consciences and behaviour, as well as in personal, social and international dealings.

The Prophet says: "I have been given the message that perfects noble morality." He thus sums up the objective of his message. His teachings are highly consistent in emphasizing the importance of morality and good manners. His own behaviour provides a shining picture as well as a practical noble example that merits a record in God's eternal book: "*Most certainly, yours is a sublime character.*" (Verse 4) Thus God praises His Messenger as well as the morality aspect of His message. With such praise God sets out a strong bond pulling the earth towards heaven. He makes this aspect the one to which believers' hearts, those who look up to His reward, are strongly attached. He thus identifies for them which values He would like them to possess.

This is the unique aspect of Islamic morality. It does not stem from the local environment, or indeed from any earthly consideration. Nor does it draw on any tradition, interest or bond that was at play in that generation. Instead, it comes from heaven and relies on it. It responds to the call coming from heaven so that those on earth look up to a high horizon. It derives from God's own absolute attributes, which people are asked to emulate. This so that ordinary human beings can achieve their utmost level of humanity and be worthy of God's honour, bestowed on them as they are placed in charge of the earth. It is in this way only that they will merit a more sublime life, "*in a seat of truth, in the presence of an all-powerful Sovereign.*" (54: 55) This means that Islamic morality is not restricted by any earthly limitation. It rather aspires to the highest level that people can achieve.

Moreover, Islamic morality is not a set of individual values, such as truthfulness, honesty, justice, mercy, kindness, etc. Rather, it is a complete system in which personal education collaborates with the legal code; a system that deals with life as a whole and defines its direction. It ultimately seeks God's pleasure, and nothing else. This morality, in its perfection, beauty, balance, consistency, straightforwardness and unity

was reflected in the person of Muḥammad, (peace be upon him), as he deservedly earned the praise granted by none other than God Almighty: "*Most certainly, yours is a sublime character.*" (Verse 4)

Reassurance About the Future

God then reassures His Messenger about the immediate future and how things will develop with those unbelievers who hurled such lies at him. He warns them that their true situation will be publicized and their falsehood be made public:

> *You shall before long see, as they will see, which of you is the one afflicted. Your Lord knows best who has strayed from His path, as He knows the ones who are rightly guided.* (Verses 5–7)

The afflicted person whom God assures the Prophet will be identified to all is the one that has gone astray, or the one subjected to a test that reveals his true condition. The two meanings are not much apart. This promise reassures the Prophet and the believers in his message and at the same time it warns those who oppose and abuse him, regardless of whatever type of madness they attribute to him. Most probably they did not mean that he was insane, because they realized that this could not be the case. They probably meant that he had associates from among the *jinn*, who perhaps inspired him with the fine words he recited. They used to say that every poet had someone from the *jinn* assisting their efforts. This was, however, far from the case with the Prophet. Nor does it fit with the nature of his revelations that are both consistent and truthful.

This promise by God confirms that the future will make clear the true nature of the Prophet and those who denied his message. The future will prove which party was afflicted or had gone astray. God reassured him that his Lord "*knows best who has strayed from His path, as He knows the ones who are rightly guided.*" (Verse 7) It is his Lord who gave him his revelations. He indeed knows that he and his followers are rightly guided. This is enough to reassure the Prophet and set his enemies worrying about what the future will bring.

God then tells the Prophet of their true feelings as they continued to argue with him about the truth he preached and the abuse they levelled at him. They may appear determined to uphold their ignorant beliefs, but the truth is that they are fundamentally uncertain about them. They are ready to shed most of these if only the Prophet would abandon some of what he called on them to accept. They are prepared to compromise everything, retaining only some appearances in return for a gesture of compromise from him. They do not have a faith that they consider to embody the truth; they are only keen to retain some appearances:

> *So pay no heed to those who deny the truth. They would love that you compromise with them, so that they will also compromise.* (Verses 8–9)

It is all subject to negotiation, then, with the aim of agreeing a meeting point somewhere in the middle, just like commercial transactions. Yet the difference between beliefs and commercial activities is vast. A person with faith will not abandon any of its beliefs or values, because its minor points are the same as its major ones. Indeed, in faith there is nothing minor and nothing major: both are the same. A faith is a single unity with parts complementing each other. Its advocate will never discard any part of it in order to please someone else.

Islam and *jāhiliyyah* can never meet halfway, or indeed in any way. This is true of Islam everywhere and across all generations. All states of ignorance, or *jāhiliyyah*, are the same: past, present or future. The gulf that separates the two states is unbridgeable and admits no compromise. The two are diametrically opposed.

Several reports speak of what the unbelievers in Makkah tried to achieve by way of compromise with the Prophet so that he would stop criticizing their worship methods. They hoped that he would give them something that would save their faces if they were to follow him. In this, they were no different from any negotiator seeking a compromise. The Prophet, however, maintained a decisive firmness, refusing to give up even a small part of his faith. Additionally, he was extremely well mannered, kind and benevolent towards his tribesmen, eager to make things easy for them. With regard to faith, he was committed,

obedient of God's instructions: "*So pay no heed to those who deny the truth.*" (Verse 8)

The Prophet did not compromise an iota of his faith even during the direst period of his life in Makkah, where he and his few followers were under siege, suffering immense persecution. He never withheld a word that needed to be uttered in the face of such tyrants. He never sought to soften their stance or to avoid their persecution by such compromise. Nor did he ever hesitate to clarify any point that was closely or remotely relevant to his faith.

Ibn Hishām reports in his biography of the Prophet:

> It should be said in fairness that the chiefs of Makkah did not take any action worth noting against the Prophet in the early stages. When he started to criticize their pagan faith and ridicule their idols, however, they began to think that the matter was much too serious to ignore. Yet, they could not do much about it because Abū Ṭālib protected his nephew against all threats. To ignore such protection by the Makkan chiefs would contravene one of the basic conventions of their social set-up. Therefore, a small delegation, composed of a number of the most influential people in Makkah, went to Abū Ṭālib complaining about his nephew's behaviour. The delegation included the two brothers 'Utbah and Shaybah, sons of Rabī'ah from the clan of 'Abd Shams; Abū Sufyān Sakhr ibn Ḥarb from Ummayah; Abū al-Bakhtarī al-'Āṣ ibn Hishām and al-Aswad ibn al-Muṭṭalib from Asad, Abū Jahl 'Amr ibn Hishām and al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah from Makhzūm; the two brothers Nabīh and Munnabih sons of al-Hajjāj from Sahm and Al-'Āṣ ibn Wā'il, also from Sahm. They made their complaint clear to Abū Ṭālib and they offered him the choice of either telling Muḥammad not to criticize their ways and ridicule their idols or allowing them to take such effective measures as they might deem necessary to end the trouble. Abū Ṭālib, who continued to follow the religion of his people, spoke to them gently and calmed them down. He did not promise them much.
>
> The Prophet continued to preach his message regardless. The crisis with his people increased in intensity. Feelings of hostility

spread. So the delegation went again to Abū Ṭālib and said to him: "Abū Ṭālib, you enjoy a position of honour and respect among us. We have requested you to stop your nephew, but you have not taken any action. We certainly cannot just sit and do nothing when he continues to speak ill of our forefathers and to ridicule us and our gods. You have to stop him or we will fight him and you over this question until one of the two parties is destroyed."

Abū Ṭālib was in a dilemma. He did not like to quarrel with his people, yet he could not bear to let his nephew down. So he called Muḥammad and explained to him what had taken place between him and his visitors. He then said to him: "You see the difficulty of my situation. Do not put my life and your life at risk, and do not burden me with what I cannot bear."

The Prophet felt that his uncle might be contemplating withdrawing his protection so he stated his own position with the greatest emphasis he could muster: "Uncle, should they give me the sun in my right hand and the moon in my left hand in return for abandoning my call, I would not do anything of the sort until God has brought this message to triumph or until I have perished." The Prophet was under the pressure of such strong emotions that tears sprang to his eyes. He started to walk away, but his uncle called him back, saying reassuringly: "My nephew, you may go and say whatever you like. I will never withdraw my protection from you, and never will I let you down."[2]

This is an image of the Prophet's commitment to his message at the precise moment when his uncle and protector, who was his last resort on earth, seemed on the verge of letting him down. It is a powerful image in its very nature, connotations and implications, as well as in its words and expressions. It is as new and powerful as this faith is. It is a reflection of the truth of God's description of the Prophet: "*Most certainly, yours is a sublime character.*" (Verse 4)

Another image also reported by Ibn Hishām, through Ibn Isḥāq relates a direct attempt at compromise offered by the unbelievers. This

2. Ibn Hishām, ibid., pp. 282–285. Also, Adil Salahi, ibid., pp. 95–96.

they did when they realized that the Prophet continued to be as firm as ever, despite their persecution of his Companions and their attempts to force them to renounce Islam.

> 'Utbah ibn Rabī'ah, one of the leading figures in Makkah, was one day sitting with a group of the Quraysh notables when he noticed the Prophet sitting alone close to the Ka'bah. 'Utbah suggested to his friends: "Shall we go to Muḥammad and make him some offers? He may accept one or the other. If he does we will give him that and put an end to our problem with him."
>
> This idea was greeted with unanimous approval. As 'Utbah sat with the Prophet he addressed him: "My nephew, you know you command a position of high esteem and noble birth among us. You have brought into the life of your community something very serious indeed. You have thus caused disunity to creep into their ranks; you have belittled their ideals, ridiculed their gods and their religion and spoken ill of their forefathers. Now listen to me. I am making you some offers which I would like you to consider. You may, perhaps, find some of them acceptable."
>
> The Prophet asked him to make his proposals, and listened attentively. 'Utbah said: "My nephew, if you have started this affair hoping to make money out of it, we are all willing to give you some of our own wealth so that you would be the richest among us. If it is honour and position you want, we will make you our master and seek your advice in all matters. If it is a throne you are after, we will make you our king. If, on the other hand, you are possessed and are unable to resist what overwhelms you, we will spare no expense in seeking a medical cure for you."
>
> When 'Utbah stopped, the Prophet asked him whether he had finished. As 'Utbah affirmed that he had, the Prophet asked him to listen to what he had to say. The Prophet then recited the first 38 verses of *Sūrah* 41 of the Qur'ān. 'Utbah listened attentively. When the Prophet finished his recitation, he prostrated himself in humble devotion to God, before saying to 'Utbah: "You have heard what I have to say and you can make up your own mind."

> 'Utbah left quietly and went to his people, who realized as they saw him approaching that a change had come over him. They looked up at him curiously, listening to his words: "I have heard something the like of which I have never heard in my life. It is neither poetry nor sorcery. Take up the suggestion I am making to you, and lay the blame for the outcome at my door. Leave this man alone. What I have heard from him will certainly bring about great events. Should the rest of the Arabs kill him, you would have been spared the trouble. If he wins, whatever glory he achieves will be yours." They retorted: "He has certainly bewitched you." He said: "I have stated my opinion, and you can do as you wish."[3]

A different report suggests that when 'Utbah listened to the Prophet's recitation, he stopped him when the Prophet read the verse saying: "*If they turn away, say: 'I warn you of a thunderbolt like the thunderbolt that struck the 'Ād and Thamūd.'*" (41: 13) He was terrified and put his hand on the Prophet's mouth, and said to him: "I appeal to you, Muḥammad, by God and our kinship not to do that." He feared that the warning may come true. He then left him and went to his people suggesting that they leave Muḥammad alone.

Be that as it may, this was another way of trying to achieve compromise. Yet it also portrays an image of the Prophet's sublime character. We see him listening to 'Utbah's hollow offers, without stopping him, even though whatever 'Utbah had to offer did not deserve a moment's thought from Muḥammad (peace be upon him), considering his own vision of the universe and its values, and his understanding of the truth and what life on earth is worth. Yet his manners would not allow him to interrupt his interlocutor or to display any sign of annoyance with his worthless offers. Instead, he listened to him with full attention until he had finished. Then he asked him whether he had finished what he had to say. His attitude throughout was that of one who is certain of the truth, reassured and at the same time very polite.

A third form of the Quraysh's attempts to reach a compromise is seen in the following report by Ibn Isḥāq:

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3. Ibn Hishām, ibid., pp. 313–314, Also, Adil Salahi, ibid., pp. 113–114.

> One day as the Prophet was doing the *ṭawāf* at the Ka'bah, he was stopped by a group of the Quraysh elders including al-Aswad ibn al-Muṭṭalib, al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah, Umayyah ibn Khalaf and al-'Āṣ ibn Wā'il. They said to him: 'Muḥammad! Let us worship the God you worship, and you worship the deities we worship. Thus, we will be together at the same level. If your God is better than ours, we will have benefited by that, and if our deities are the better ones, you will have made the benefit.' He answered as God instructed him: "*Say: 'Unbelievers! I do not worship what you worship, nor do you worship what I worship. I shall never worship what you worship, nor will you ever worship what I worship. You have your own religion and I have mine.'*"[4] (109: 1–6)

God thus put an end to this absurd offer, and the Prophet replied to them as God so instructed him.

What Sort of Nobility

The importance of the moral element is again stressed when the Prophet is ordered not to obey one particular unbeliever. We have a full list of the terrible and shameful qualities of this person, who is then threatened with humiliation:

> *Furthermore, pay no heed to any contemptible swearer, slanderer, going about with defaming tales, hinderer of good, aggressor, sinful, cruel and, on top of all that, given to evil. Just because he has wealth and children, when Our revelations are recited to him, he says, 'Fables of the ancients!' We shall brand him on the snout.* (Verses 10–16)

It is said that this person was al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah, to whom the following passage in *Sūrah* 74 also refers: "*Leave to me the one I created alone, to whom I have granted vast wealth, and sons by his side, making life smooth and easy for him; yet he greedily desires that I give him more. No! He has set himself stubbornly against Our revelations. I will constrain him*

4. Ibn Sayyid al-Nas (1996), *'Uyūn al-Athar*, Dar al-Turath, Madīnah, p. 197.

to endure a painful uphill climb! He thought and he schemed. Damn him, how he schemed! Again, damn him, how he schemed! He looked around, then he frowned and glared, then he turned his back and gloried in his arrogance, and said, 'This is just sorcery handed down from olden times! This is nothing but the word of a mere mortal!' I will cast him into the scorching fire." (74: 11–26) There are many reports that speak of al-Walīd's repeated scheming against the Prophet and his opposition to the message of Islam, trying to turn people away from it. It is also reported that the verses in the present *sūrah* refer to al-Akhnas ibn Sharīq, another of the Prophet's determined opponents. The present denunciation of the man, whether he was al-Walīd or al-Akhnas, and the stern warnings given in the other *sūrah*, suffice as evidence of this person's wicked role in the fight against the Prophet and the Islamic message. They also indicate his evil intentions and that he was devoid of all goodness.

The Qur'ān lists here nine of his bad characteristics. He is a 'swearer', which suggests that he always does so. Only a liar swears much because he feels that people do not believe him. Therefore, he resorts to swearing to persuade people to accept what he says. Moreover, he is 'contemptible', someone who does not even respect himself. Nor do people trust his word. This is proven by the fact that he feels the need to swear all the time to overcome people's mistrust. Despite the fact that he has wealth, sons and position, he remains contemptible. It is often the case that a tyrant remains contemptible even though he holds power and authority. Likewise, dignity is a personal trait which remains distinctive of its possessor even though he has nothing of the material luxuries of this world.

He is a 'slanderer' who disrespects people and tries to insult them by word and gesture, in their presence or absence. This is a characteristic that Islam brands as most hateful because it is contrary to gallantry, self-respect and propriety of conduct towards others in so far as respecting their dignity, regardless of their social position. The Qur'ān denounces this characteristic in several places: "*Woe to every taunting, slandering backbiter.*" (104: 1) "*Believers! No men shall deride other men: it may well be that those [whom they deride] are better than themselves. And no women [shall deride other] women: it may well be that those [whom they deride] are better than themselves. And neither shall you defame yourselves,*

nor insult one another by [opprobrious] epithets." (49: 11) All the actions mentioned in this verse are types of slander.

Another characteristic of this person is that he 'goes about with defaming tales'. He goes around, telling people what will spoil their relations, create rancour in their hearts and destroy their ties. This is an evil and contemptible quality that no one who respects himself and wants to be respected will entertain. People realize that the one who tells tales about others is unworthy of respect. Even those who listen to him will not respect him, because they know he is evil.

The Prophet instructed his Companions not to tell him anything that would cause him to change his attitude towards any of them. He said: "Let no one tell me any negative thing about any of my Companions. I love to come out to you with no ill-feeling in my heart." [Related by Abū Dāwūd and al-Tirmidhī.] In an authentic *ḥadīth*, 'Abdullāh ibn Mas'ūd reports that "the Prophet passed by two graves. He said that the two buried in them are suffering punishment for no cardinal sin. One of them used not to cover himself when urinating, and the other used to go about with defaming tales." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] Hudhayfah quotes the Prophet as saying: "No one who goes about with defaming tales will be admitted into heaven." [Related by Aḥmad, al-Bukhārī, Muslim and others.] Yazīd ibn al-Sakan reports that "the Prophet said to his Companions: 'Shall I tell you who are the best among you?' They said: 'Please do.' He said: 'They are the ones who, when seen, the name of God is glorified.' He then said: 'Shall I tell you who are the worst among you? They are the ones who go about with defaming tales, who spoil relations between friends and try to get innocent people defamed.'" [Related by Aḥmad.]

Islam naturally denounces this despicable and shameful characteristic in strong terms. It spoils people's hearts and destroys friendships. It degrades the one who does it before it spoils relations between others. It undermines the person's own character even before undermining society. It creates mistrust between people and often lands the innocent in trouble.

Moreover, this person is a 'hinderer of good', preventing it from reaching him and others. He used to prevent people from accepting the divine faith, even though it is the sum of all goodness. Furthermore,

whenever he noticed that any of his children or clansmen leaned towards the Prophet, he would say to them: 'If any of you were to follow Muḥammad's religion, I would never give him an iota.' Thus he tried his utmost to prevent them from accepting Islam. Hence, the Qur'ān records this as one of his characteristics.

He is also an 'aggressor', stepping over the limits of right and justice. His aggression is levelled against the Prophet and the Muslims on the one hand, and against his own family and clan on the other, given he prevented them from accepting Islam. Aggression is an evil quality which the Qur'ān and the Prophet denounce in clear terms. Islam forbids it in any form, even in one's approach to food and drink: "*Eat of the wholesome things which We have provided for you and do not transgress.*" (20: 81) Both justice and moderation are essential qualities of the Islamic code.

What is more is that he is 'sinful', committing all sorts of sins so as to earn this description, without specifying what it is he does. Thus, committing sin becomes his essential characteristic.

The next characteristic is stated in translation as 'cruel', but in the Arabic original this is *'utull*, which by its very sound connotes a host of features that no group of words can adequately describe. The one who is *'utull* is cruel, unfriendly, gluttonous, heavy handed, mean, given to treating others badly. Abū al-Dardā', a Companion of the Prophet, defined an *'utull* person as 'the one who is covetous, ill-mannered, gluttonous, greedy for money, tight-fisted.' The word *'utull* thus reveals a hateful character.

On top of all these evil qualities, this enemy of Islam is also described as 'given to evil'. The Arabic word used here is *zanīm*, which has more than one meaning. One of these denotes someone who is attached to a group of people, but he is of suspect descent. None of them knows his parentage. Another meaning denotes a person who lacks morality and who is known by his many evil deeds. This second meaning is perhaps more true of al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah, but the use of this word here makes him contemptible even though he was also proud and arrogant.

These personal qualities are followed with a denunciation of this person's attitude to divine revelations: "*Just because he has wealth and children, when Our revelations are recited to him, he says, 'Fables of the*

ancients!'" (Verses 14–15) How ungrateful! How can anyone enjoy God's favours of children and wealth and then deride His revelations, ridicule His Messenger and denounce His message? By itself, this is equal to all the evil qualities already mentioned.

Hence a warning is issued to him by the Almighty. The warning hits at the very position of pride on account of his wealth and children, in the same way as the earlier mention of his personal characteristics hit at his pride in his position among his people. He hears now a threat that will inevitably be fulfilled: "*We shall brand him on the snout.*" (Verse 16)

The Arabic word *khurṭūm*, translated here as snout, means, among other things, the nose of a wild pig. Perhaps this is the meaning intended here, denoting his nose. In Arabic, the nose connotes dignity. People refer to an honourable person as one of high nose, while a humiliated one is described as having his nose in the dust. Hence, the threat of branding him on his nose connotes double humiliation: being branded like slaves used to be, and his nose being referred to as a snout or pig's nose.

Undoubtedly, these verses fell like a fatal blow for al-Walīd. He belonged to a community which attached much importance to avoiding abuse by a poet, even though the abuse was no more than false allegations. How about such a truthful description by the Creator of the universe, in such an inimitable style, and in the Qur'ān which is echoed throughout the universe for the rest of time! It was a fatal blow that this enemy of Islam and its noble Prophet deserved.

The People of the Garden

A reminder of the outcome of the greed and denial of other people's rights then follows. This in a reference to a group of people who owned a garden. It seems that the story was well known to the Arabs addressed by the Qur'ān. The reminder makes it clear that what people have of wealth and children is only a means to test them, in the same way as the people of the garden were put to trial. The result of all such tests will inevitably be revealed:

We try them as We tried the owners of a certain garden, who vowed that they would harvest its fruits on the morrow, and made no allowance. A visitation from your Lord came upon that garden while they were asleep, so that by morning it was stripped bare and looked desolate. At daybreak they called out to one another: 'Go early to your tilth if you wish to gather all its fruits.' So they went off, whispering to one another, 'Make sure that no needy person enters the garden today.' Early they went, strongly bent on their purpose. When they saw it, they exclaimed: 'Surely we have lost our way! No! We are utterly ruined.' The wisest among them said, 'Did I not tell you, "Will you not extol God's limitless glory?"' They said, 'Limitless in His glory is our Lord! Truly, we were doing wrong.' Then they turned upon each other with mutual reproach. They said: 'Woe betide us! We have done great wrong. It may be that our Lord will grant us something better instead. To our Lord we truly turn in hope.' Such is the suffering [in this life], but greater indeed is the suffering in the life to come, if they but knew it. (Verses 17–33)

This story may well have been well known, but its narration in the Qur'ān reveals what lies behind its episodes of God's power, the tests He sets for some of His servants and their requital at the end. This is, then, what is new in its presentation in the Qur'ān. As it unfolds, we see a group of naïve people who appear to us in their thoughts and actions like simple rural people. Perhaps this type of person was closer to the addressees who were stubborn in their rejection of the faith, but who were not particularly sophisticated characters. Rather, they tended to be simple folk.

From an artistic point of view, the narrative represents one of the methods of story-telling in the Qur'ān. It includes an element of surprise that captures the listener's interest. It shows the ludicrous nature of human scheming as compared with God's planning. Moreover, the events are brought alive as if we see them unfolding.

We see the owners of a garden agreeing to a plan. According to reports, the previous owner of the garden was a good man who had allocated a portion of its harvest to the poor. His heirs, however, wanted to keep all its fruits and yield for themselves, depriving the poor of their customary share.

The story now unfolds: "*We try them as We tried the owners of a certain garden, who vowed that they would harvest its fruits on the morrow, and made no allowance.*" (Verses 17–18) They made up their minds to harvest its fruits very early in the morning, taking all for themselves and making no allowance for the poor. They swore to this and even went to bed with this evil intention. We leave them in their slumber to look at what takes place during the night when they are totally unaware. God certainly does not sleep. His scheme is different from theirs: "*A visitation from your Lord came upon that garden while they were asleep, so that by morning it was stripped bare and looked desolate.*" (Verses 19–20) We then leave the garden to look at the plotters and what they are now doing.

They wake up very early, calling each other to get ready: "*At daybreak they called out to one another: 'Go early to your tilth if you wish to gather all its fruits.'*" (Verses 21–22) Thus they remind and counsel one another. The *sūrah* carries its ridicule further, showing them on their way, speaking in whispers to ensure that no one learns of their plot to deprive the poor of their legitimate share: "*So they went off, whispering to one another, 'Make sure that no needy person enters the garden today.'*" (Verses 23–24) We, the reader and listener, know something unknown to the owners of the garden. We have seen the subtle hand making away with all its fruits, leaving it stripped bare. We, therefore, hold our breath to look at what these plotters do.

The *sūrah* adds more ridicule: "*Early they went, strongly bent on their purpose.*" (Verse 25) They certainly felt able to deprive others, or at least to deprive themselves. Now for the surprise: "*When they saw it, they exclaimed: 'Surely we have lost our way!'*" (Verse 26) This is certainly not our garden. We seem to have lost our way. However, they soon make sure: "*No! We are utterly ruined.*" (Verse 27) This is the truth of the matter.

Now that they are facing the results of their scheme that aimed to deprive the needy, the middle one among them, who was their best and wisest, reminds them of his earlier counsel. He apparently had a different point of view, but when he could not persuade them to accept it, he went along with them instead of holding on to the truth. Hence, he suffered the same fate as they. Hence, too, his reminder: "*The wisest among them said: 'Did I not tell you, "Will you not extol God's limitless*

glory?'" (Verse 28) Now, when it is too late, they listen to sound counsel: "*They said, 'Limitless in His glory is our Lord! Truly, we were doing wrong.'*" (Verse 29)

As happens in every situation when results turn bad, everyone tries to shift the blame away from himself: "*Then they turned upon each other with mutual reproach.*" (Verse 30) Then, they finally stop blaming each other and acknowledge their common fault, hoping that God will forgive them and replace their lost harvest: "*They said: 'Woe betide us! We have done great wrong. It may be that our Lord will grant us something better instead. To our Lord we truly turn in hope.'*" (Verses 31–32)

Before the curtains are drawn on the last scene we have the *sūrah*'s parting comment: "*Such is the suffering [in this life], but greater indeed is the suffering in the life to come, if they but knew it.*" (Verse 33) This, then, is a test of affluence. The people of Makkah should learn this lesson for they are being tested in the same way as the owners of the garden were tested. They should consider what their own test will bring in its wake. They should take heed and avoid what is certainly greater than any test and suffering endured in this present world: "*Greater indeed is the suffering in the life to come, if they but knew it.*"

The *sūrah* cites this well-known story, given it deals with their own environment. In this way it establishes a clear link between the application of God's law to communities of olden times and to the generation being addressed. It touches their hearts with what is close to their own lives. At the same time it tells the believers that the wealth they see the unbelievers enjoying is nothing but a test God sets for them. It has its own consequences. It is part of God's law that He tests people either with luxuries and comforts or with hardship. Those who behave with arrogance, deprive others of their share, and feel that what they are given is theirs by right may always face a result of the type suffered by those owners of the garden. Yet, "*greater indeed is the suffering in the life to come, if they but knew it.*" (Verse 33) Believers who watch God in all their actions enjoy a different outcome: "*For the God-fearing there shall be gardens of bliss with their Lord.*" (Verse 34) The contrast between the two ends echoes the contrast between their behaviour and reality. Two opposite lines of action lead to two contrasting ends.

Can They Be Equal?

At this point, the *sūrah* puts a simple, uncomplicated argument to them, challenging them, putting to them one question after another, on matters that can have only one answer. It warns them, showing them a fearsome scene of the life to come, and threatens them that, in this present life, they could face a war against God Almighty:

> *Should We treat those who submit themselves to Us as We treat the guilty? What is the matter with you? On what basis do you judge? Or have you a divine book which you study, and in which you find that you shall have all that you choose? Or have you received solemn oaths, binding on Us till the Day of Resurrection, that you will get whatever you yourselves decide? Ask them which of them will vouch for this. Or have they partners? Let them produce their partners, if what they say is true. On the day when matters become so dire, they will be asked to prostrate themselves, but they will not be able to do so. Their eyes will be downcast, with ignominy overwhelming them. They were invited to prostrate themselves when they were safe. Therefore, leave to Me those who deny this revelation. We shall bring them low, step by step, in ways beyond their knowledge. I will allow them more time: My scheme is truly firm. Do you [Prophet] demand a payment from them [and so they fear] that they would be burdened with debt? Do they have knowledge of the hidden reality so that they can write it down?* (Verses 35–47)

The warning against punishment in the life to come and a war in this present life is made within the argument and challenge this passage delineates. This has the effect of heightening the argument and increasing the pressure the challenge represents. The passage starts with a rhetorical question: "*Should We treat those who submit themselves to Us as We treat the guilty?*" (Verse 35) This question refers to the outcome of the two parties that has already been stated. This is a question that admits only one answer. No, it cannot be! Those who submit to God can never be treated on the same footing as those who are knowingly guilty. No logic and no standard of justice allows that the guilty and those who submit

to God should face the same result. Hence, the *sūrah* puts a second rhetorical question to them: "*What is the matter with you? On what basis do you judge?*" (Verse 36) How do you judge matters so as to make the two equal? This certainly cannot be.

The *sūrah* moves on to add an element of sarcasm: "*Or have you a divine book which you study, and in which you find that you shall have all that you choose?*" (Verses 37–38) It is a sarcastic question that asks whether or not they have a book and if their studies lead them to make a judgement that no logic or fair standard would accept. A book that tells them that those who submit to God and the guilty are treated in the same way is indeed a funny sort of book that seeks to please them and fan their desires. It provides them with whatever rulings they like. Needless to say, such a book has nothing to do with truth, reason, justice or human tradition.

"*Or have you received solemn oaths, binding on Us till the Day of Resurrection, that you will get whatever you yourselves decide?*" (Verse 39) If they do not have a book to rely on in their judgement, then they must have the alternative spelled out in this verse: a binding pledge by God that remains in force until the Day of Judgement, one to the effect that they will have whatever they decide. They may choose as they please. But this is not the case: they have no such oaths or pledges. How can they, then, assert their claims? On what basis do they make such claims?

"*Ask them which of them will vouch for this.*" (Verse 40) Who of them can pledge his word of honour that they have such an agreement with God, or that the pledges He has made them will remain in force until the Day of Judgement? This is again a sarcastic question that should place them in endless embarrassment.

"*Or have they partners? Let them produce their partners, if what they say is true.*" (Verse 41) They used to associate partners with God, but the *sūrah* makes these their own partners, not God's. It challenges them to invoke these partners if they believe that what they say is true. The question here is when will they invoke such partners? "*On the day when matters become so dire, they will be asked to prostrate themselves, but they will not be able to do so. Their eyes will be downcast, with ignominy overwhelming them. They were invited to prostrate themselves when they were safe.*" (Verses 42–43) The *sūrah* puts this scene before them as if

it is taking place at the moment of address. Thus, they are challenged to bring in their alleged partners, when this day appears as a reality, unattached in God's knowledge to a particular time. To put it before the addressees in this way gives it a very strong and profound effect. So, on the Day of Judgement, when matters are so dire and people are in great distress, these arrogant people will be asked to prostrate themselves, but they will be unable to do so, either because the time for this has lapsed, or because their bodies are so tense they will not respond. Be that as it may, the image here is one of extreme distress.

The *sūrah* continues painting their sorry picture: "*Their eyes will be downcast, with ignominy overwhelming them.*" (Verse 43) Such arrogant, tyrannical people with downcast eyes and overwhelming ignominy are shown in perfect contrast to the attitude they displayed in this life when they were extremely arrogant. This reminds us of the threat mentioned earlier in the *sūrah*: "*We shall brand him on the snout.*" (Verse 16) The impression of humiliation and ignominy is clear and deliberate. Yet in their humble position, enduring much humiliation, they are reminded of the arrogance that brought about this suffering: "*They were invited to prostrate themselves when they were safe.*" (Verse 43) When they were able to do it willingly, they arrogantly refused to prostrate themselves before God. Now, in the hereafter, when the life of this world is behind them, they wish they could respond to the invitation, but they cannot so prostrate themselves.

In their utterly dire situation, they face a stern warning: "*Therefore, leave to Me those who deny this revelation.*" (Verse 44) The warning shakes their very foundations. It is God Almighty who says to His Messenger that he should leave to Him those who deny His revelations. He will settle the matter with them. Who denies God's revelations other than such a weak, small creature devoid of all strength? Indeed, he is no more than a little ant, or a tiny particle. Nay, he is much less when he has to face the might of God, the All-Powerful. The Prophet is told to leave God alone with such a person and to go and rest with his fellow believers. That person's fight is not with the Prophet and the believers, but with God. He is God's enemy and God will deal with him. How terrifying! Who, then, would want to be an unbeliever! At the same time, how reassuring for the Prophet and the believers!

The Almighty then discloses the fighting plan against this little, weak creature: "*We shall bring them low, step by step, in ways beyond their knowledge. I will allow them more time: My scheme is truly firm.*" (Verses 44–45) These unbelievers and all dwellers on earth are too small and weak to warrant God making such a plan for them. God is only warning them so that they may save themselves before it is too late. They should realize that their apparent security is the trap they fall into. If God allows them time when they indulge in aggression and injustice and persist in error, this is merely to lead them on to their miserable end. They will thus carry their full burdens. They will come on that day burdened with sin, deserving all humiliation and ignominy.

Nothing is fairer or more merciful than a timely warning that places the outcome before them. God in His limitless glory offers His justice and mercy to His enemies and the enemies of His faith and Messenger. They are offered this warning when they still have the perfect chance to choose for themselves. All matters are laid bare. It is up to them.

God – limitless is He in His glory – gives chances, but He does not ignore anything. He allows an unjust tyrant respite, but then when He takes him, He does not let go. Here God speaks of the plan He in His wisdom has chosen. He tells His Messenger to leave those who deny His revelations to Him. They are the ones who take pride in their wealth, power, children and position. God will allow them respite, making all these favours their lure. He thus reassures His Messenger and warns His enemies. They are then left to consider their position.

The scene of the Day of Judgement, with all that it involves of stress and hardship, and the strong warning are followed with a continuation of the argument that wonders at their singular attitude: "*Do you [Prophet] demand a payment from them [and so they fear] that they would be burdened with debt?*" (Verse 46) Is it that you, Prophet, demand a hefty fee for providing guidance to them, and is it this fee that causes them to turn away and deny the divine faith, preferring to face such a miserable end? Could it be this or, "*Do they have knowledge of the hidden reality so that they can write it down?*" (Verse 47) Are they so certain of what is in store for them and, as a result, have no worry about it? Have they already written it down, or was it written according to what they wish? No answer is needed here. How, then, can they adopt such an attitude?

What Type of Fight?

A remarkable statement, "*Leave to Me those who deny this revelation,*" carries with it a terrible threat. It is then followed by an outline of the battle between God and His enemies. Together, the two statements make it clear that the Prophet and the believers have no part in the battle between faith and unfaith, truth and falsehood. This is indeed true, even though the Prophet and the believers may think that they have a genuine role to play in this battle. Whatever role they do play, when God so facilitates it for them, is only a part of God's will in His battle against His enemies. They are merely a tool, which God may or may not use. In either case, He does what He wants to do. In both cases, it is He who conducts the battle according to His laws ascertained as He chooses.

This statement was revealed when the Prophet and his followers were still in Makkah, a small minority unable to do much. Hence, it served as reassurance to those weak elements suffering persecution, and it struck fear in the hearts of those who thought they were powerful, having much at their disposal. In Madīnah, the situation completely changed. God willed then that the believers should play a prominent role in the battle. Yet at the same time, He also reiterated what He had said earlier, when they were in Makkah, weak and helpless. When they achieved their resounding victory at Badr, He said to them: "*It was not you who slew them, but it was God who slew them. When you threw [a handful of dust], it was not your act, but God's, so that He might put the believers through a fair test of His own making. Indeed, God hears all and knows all.*" (8: 17)

God wants this truth of the battle being His battle to be firmly understood by the believers. It is His issue and He settles it. When He assigns a role in it to the believers, it is only because He wants to put them to a fair test, for which they earn a good reward. As for the war itself, it is He who fights it, and it is He who assigns its victory. He is able to conduct this war without them. When they participate in it, they are one of the tools He uses, not the only tool. There are many Qur'ānic texts that assert this truth in all situations. It also fits well with the Islamic concept of God's will, rules and laws, as well as the nature

of human efforts made to accomplish God's will. These efforts are no more than a tool in God's hand.

This truth gives believers great reassurance in their two conditions of weakness and strength, provided they are sincere in their efforts, placing their trust in God when they fight for His cause. It is not their own power that ensures victory in the battle between truth and falsehood, faith and unfaith. It is God who ensures their victory. Their weakness does not lead to defeat because God's power supports them. God, however, may give respite to the unbelievers and lead them step by step. He determines events according to His will, wisdom, justice and mercy.

At the same time, this truth is bound to strike fear in the hearts of the enemy, whether the believers they are confronting are in a state of weakness or in a state of strength. Those believers are not the actual opponent. It is God who is conducting this war, with His own might. It is God who says to the Prophet to leave such miserable enemies to Him. It is He who leads them on step by step so that they fall into the fearful trap. Even if this enemy is equipped with all its strength, the same applies, because His power is indeed what sets the trap: "*I will allow them more time: My scheme is truly firm.*" (Verse 45) As for the timing of when all this will happen, this is something only God knows. Hence, no one should be deluded by a false sense of security. Only a transgressor allows such a false feeling to take hold of him.

The Value of Patience

Now the Prophet is directed to remain patient in adversity. He should persevere in his efforts to deliver his message, and face all obstacles including people's twisted minds, the harm they cause him and their denial of the truth. He must remain patient facing all this adversity until God judges as He pleases at the time of His choice. The Prophet is here reminded of the experience of a brother of his who lived in former times. That prophet was impatient and felt fed up with all the opposition. Had he not been granted God's grace, he would have been left in a state of disgrace:

So, await in patience your Lord's judgement; and do not be like the man in the whale who called out in distress. Had not grace from his Lord reached him, he would have been left upon that barren shore in a state of disgrace. His Lord, however, chose him and made him one of the righteous. (Verses 48–50)

The man in the whale was the Prophet Jonah, as mentioned in *Sūrah* 37. God reminds the Prophet Muḥammad, the last of all prophets, of Jonah's experience so that he can benefit by it. All prophets preceded Muḥammad and he, the one charged with delivering God's final message to all mankind, should benefit from all their experiences. His task is not to address a particular tribe, town or nation, but to put God's message to all communities and all generations. His example should provide guidance for them all. Thus he should set a code of living that remains suitable for all mankind's needs, in all situations and all conditions, despite the fact that every day brings something new.

The gist of Jonah's experience is that God sent him to the people of a town said to be Nineveh, near Mousil in today's Iraq. When they were slow in responding to his call, he was terribly upset. He left them in anger, thinking that God would not leave him to bear all the opposition those people presented. God would be kind to him and send him to others who would be less stubborn. In his distress, he went towards the coast where he took a boat. When they were far out at sea, the boat became shaky and seemed about to sink. It thus became necessary to throw someone overboard so as to reduce the load. They drew lots to choose that person. Jonah was the one, and they threw him overboard. Subsequently, a whale swallowed him. Finding himself in such terrible distress, in layers of darkness, inside the whale in the depths of the sea, Jonah appealed to God, saying: "*There is no deity other than You! Limitless are You in Your glory! I have done wrong indeed.*" (21: 87) God bestowed His grace on him and the whale threw him out, leaving him skinless on the shore. His skin had melted inside the whale. God preserved his life by His will, which is unrestricted by any law that is familiar or unfamiliar to man.

Here, in this *sūrah*, God says that had it not been for the grace He bestowed on him, Jonah would have been abandoned, disgraced by

God because of his lack of patience. He had acted on his own initiative, without waiting for God's permission. He was though only spared by God's grace. God accepted Jonah's repentance just as he demonstrated what deserves acceptance. Hence, God chose him and made him one of His righteous servants.

God reminds the Prophet Muḥammad of Jonah's experience in the whale so as to reassure him at a time he was facing stubborn rejection. This reminder comes after He has told him to leave the battle to Him, to conduct as He determines in the way He wishes. What the Prophet is required to do, is to remain patient in adversity and to await God's judgement as and when it comes.

The true hardship the advocates of the divine message face is that of remaining patient in adversity until God makes His judgement at the right time, as His wisdom dictates. Along the way they face many types of adversity such as accusations of lying, physical persecution, stubborn rejection, the apparent power of falsehood as it seems to be victorious, and the need to remain steadfast in the face of all this, reassured that God's promise will be fulfilled. They must not hesitate to travel along their charted way, no matter what hardship they have to face. This requires great effort, determination and patience, as well as support from God. As for the battle itself, God has determined its nature and willed to conduct it Himself. It is He who has decided to give the unbelievers time and to lead them step by step, for a purpose of His own. Thus did He promise His Messenger, and He fulfilled the promise in good time.

To All Mankind

The *sūrah* concludes with an image of the unbelievers as they received the Prophet's call. They are full of hatred and grudges shown in the way they look at him as though they want to do away with him. The Qur'ān gives the best description of their looks:

> *The unbelievers well-nigh trip you up with their eyes when they hear this reminder. They say, 'He is surely mad.'* (Verse 51)

Their looks almost affect the Prophet's feet so as to make him lose his balance and trip. It is a superb image describing the hatred embedded in these looks that boil with anger. Added to these hateful looks is their false allegation: "*They say: He is surely mad.*" (Verse 51) The image is taken from a scene of public address when the message is openly presented to people and they are called upon to accept it. It cannot be anywhere other than a public place where some of the most determined opponents are present, reacting with such looks that reflect a deep-seated hatred.

The final comment in the *sūrah* says: "*Yet it is but a reminder to all mankind.*" (Verse 52) Such a reminder cannot be presented by a madman. God tells the truth, while falsehood emanates from lying fabricators.

We conclude our commentary with highlighting the phrase '*to all mankind*', used at the end of the *sūrah*. We should remember that this revelation was Makkan, occurring in the early days of Islam, when the message was met with hard denial and the Prophet received such spiteful looks, when the unbelievers were fighting it with all their might. At this low ebb in its fortunes, the message of Islam declares its universal nature. Thus, its address to all mankind was in no way something it acquired later in Madīnah, when it achieved several victories, as some present-day fabricators allege. Right from its early days in Makkah, Islam declared its universal nature because this is part of its essence, right from its very first day. Thus did God will it to be and thus did He determine its direction from its early days. Thus will it remain until the end of time. God has willed it to be so, and He is its sponsor who protects and defends it. It is He who fights its battle against its opponents. As for its advocates, they only have to remain steadfast, patient in adversity until God, the best of judges, makes His judgement.

SŪRAH 69

Al-Ḥāqqah

(The Inevitable Truth)

Prologue

This is an awesome *sūrah*, one that strikes terror in our hearts, shaking us up. From start to finish it focuses on something that is very serious, showing one awesome image after another. Some of these are frightening, some are majestic and others depict suffering, yet they are all characterized by strong movements. As a whole, the *sūrah* enhances the feeling that faith and religion are very serious; they admit no frivolity. The profundity of such questions is serious here in this life as also in the life to come. Furthermore, it is no less serious in God's own measure. Indeed, it is so serious that it permits no distraction. For, to turn away from faith and religion is to incur God's displeasure and all that is attendant with that, even though the one who turns away may happen to be God's Messenger. It is larger than God's Messenger, indeed all mankind, because it is the question of the truth absolute, laid down by the Lord of all the worlds.

This impression is heightened by the very name given in this *sūrah* to the Day of Judgement and which gives it its title, *al-Ḥāqqah*. The very sound of the word imparts a feeling of decisiveness, seriousness and a grounding stability. It sounds like a heavy object being lifted some considerable distance before being placed firmly into position. The strongly aspirated '*ḥ*' sound appears to be lifted by the elongated

'*ā*' before it is firmly placed at the doubled '*q*' and then finally stabilized with the final '*h*' sound.

We see such great seriousness in the fates of those who denied the truth of faith and the Day of Judgement. One community after another suffered such severe punishment that each were utterly destroyed: "*The people of Thamūd and 'Ād denied the Striker. The Thamūd were destroyed by an overwhelming event, while the 'Ād were destroyed by a furiously howling wind, which He caused to rage upon them for seven nights and eight decisive days. You could see their people lying dead, like uprooted trunks of hollow palm trees. Can you see any trace of them now? Pharaoh, too, and those before him, and the ruined cities – all indulged in sin, and disobeyed their Lord's messenger; and so He took them to task with an ever-tightening grip. When the waters rose high, We carried you in the floating Ark, making it all a lasting reminder for you, so that attentive ears may take heed.*" (Verses 4–12) Thus, all those who turned away from faith suffered such grave and sudden punishments, as befit their approach to this decisive and serious requirement. It is important to realize then that this question of faith and religion admits no frivolity of approach and allows no distraction.

Such seriousness is also seen in the picture the *sūrah* draws of the resurrection, the terrible end of the universe, and the even more majestic scene of the angels carrying the Throne: "*When the trumpet is sounded a single time, and the earth and mountains are lifted up and with one mighty crash are flattened, that which is certain to happen will on that day have come to pass. The sky will be rent asunder, for, it will have become frail on that day. The angels will stand on all its sides and, on that day, eight of them will bear aloft the Throne of your Lord.*" (Verses 13–17)

Such awesomeness and majesty impart added seriousness to the scene of accounting for the all-important question of faith. Both help to deepen its effect on us, as do the beats of the *sūrah* and the statements of those who are granted reward and those who are doomed to suffer: "*He who is given his record in his right hand will say, 'Come you all! Read this my record. I certainly knew that one day I would have to face my account.' He will be in a happy state of life, in a lofty garden, with its fruits within easy reach. 'Eat and drink to your hearts' content as a reward*

for what you have done in days gone by.' But he who is given his record in his left hand will say, 'Would that I had never been shown my record and knew nothing of my account! Would that death had been the end of me! Nothing has my wealth availed me. I am now bereft of all my power.'" (Verses 19–29) This long lamentation gives us a strong impression of the terrible end suffered.

God's own words, spelling out His sentence in the middle of that solemn scene on that great day, add to the seriousness of the whole affair: "*Lay hold of him and shackle him, and burn him in the fire of hell, and then fasten him in a chain seventy cubits long.*" (Verses 30–32) Each clause in this command sounds as if it carries the whole weight of the heavens and earth to strike the offender in what is a terrifying image. This sentence is then followed with an explanation of its justifying causes: "*He did not believe in God Almighty, and he never encouraged feeding the needy. So, no friend has he here today, nor any food except the filth that none other than the sinners eat.*" (Verses 33–37)

A hint of a great oath is followed in God's own statement outlining the truth of this final religion: "*I need not swear by what you can see and what you cannot see: this [Qur'ān] is the word of a noble Messenger, not the word of a poet – how little you believe! nor the word of a soothsayer – how little you reflect! This [Qur'ān] is a revelation from the Lord of all the worlds.*" (Verses 38–43)

Further seriousness is provided by the *sūrah*'s last beat as it issues a decisive warning of a very severe punishment to be meted out to anyone who tries to introduce any alteration into this faith. This applies even to Muḥammad, God's Messenger: "*Had he attributed some fabrications to Us, We would indeed have seized him by the right hand and cut off his life-vein, and none of you could have saved him.*" (Verses 44–47)

The *sūrah* concludes with another decisive statement making the question of the final divine message as it is embodied in the Qur'ān absolutely clear: "*This [Qur'ān] is indeed a reminder to the God-fearing. We well know that among you are some who deny its truth. Yet it will be a cause of bitter regret for the unbelievers. It is indeed truth absolute. Extol, then, the glory of the name of your Lord, the Supreme.*" (Verses 48–52) It is a finale that leaves no room for anything further to be added.

The Style

The *sūrah* has a central theme, which it aims to make absolutely clear. The style and beat it employs and the images and scenes it draws work in unison to drive this home to us in a highly inspiring way. Thus, the *sūrah* gives us a great host of images indeed it surrounds us with them from all sides. We cannot fail to see them brought alive as if they are taking place in front of our very eyes. Here, we see the fates of the Thamūd, the 'Ād, Pharaoh, Sodom and Gomorrah and feel engulfed by their terrible effects. The scene of the great floods and the few human survivors carried in the Ark is painted in two short verses. Read, if you will, how the 'Ād suffered their terrible fate: "*The 'Ād were destroyed by a furiously howling wind, which He caused to rage upon them for seven nights and eight decisive days. You could see their people lying dead, like uprooted trunks of hollow palm trees. Can you see any trace of them now?*" (Verses 6–8) Can you fail to see in your mind's eye how this raging storm continued to vent its furious havoc for eight days and seven nights leaving the 'Ād utterly destroyed and resembling hollow, uprooted tree trunks? It is such a vivid scene that we cannot help but see it with our eyes and paint it with our minds. The same applies to all images of the terrible fates suffered by unbelievers of old.

Then again the images of the terrible end of the universe are brought before us; we hear the noise accompanying them and we are filled with terror and distress. Listen to this verse: "*The earth and mountains are lifted up and with one mighty crash are flattened.*" (Verse 14) Do you not hear that mighty crash after having seen the lifting up and then the fall? Listen again: "*The sky will be rent asunder, for, it will have become frail on that day.*" (Verse 16) Does this sad end, with a beautiful sky torn apart, present itself clearly before you? Keep listening: "*The angels will stand on all its sides and, on that day, eight of them will bear aloft the Throne of your Lord. On that day you shall be brought to judgement and none of your secrets will remain hidden.*" (Verses 17–18) The majesty of this awesome scene can only but fill your imagination.

Then look at the image of the person receiving his record in his right hand. The whole world is too small for his joy. He cheerfully calls on all creatures to come and read his record: "*Come you all! Read this my record.*

I certainly knew that one day I would have to face my account." (Verses 19–20) Contrast this with the image of the one whose record is given to him in his left hand: his words, tone and expression reflect his heart-felt grief: "*Would that I had never been shown my record and knew nothing of my account! Would that death had been the end of me! Nothing has my wealth availed me. I am now bereft of all my power.*" (Verses 25–29)

Who of us will fail to shudder when we listen to the judgement in the case of the latter person: "*Lay hold of him and shackle him, and burn him in the fire of hell, and then fasten him in a chain seventy cubits long.*" (Verses 30–32) We almost see those receiving the command rushing to carry it out, and we visualize his situation there as we read: "*So, no friend has he here today, nor any food except the filth that none other than the sinners eat.*" (Verses 35–37) Finally, who of us will not experience fear when our minds receive this stern warning: "*Had he attributed some fabrications to Us, We would indeed have seized him by the right hand and cut off his life-vein, and none of you could have saved him.*" (Verses 44–47) Combined, all these images and scenes are so powerful, clear and effective as to require our pressing attention.

The *sūrah*'s verse endings and their variation contribute to its clearly profound effect. At the very beginning, we have a very long '*a*' followed by a doubled plosive '*q*' sound and a fricative '*h*'. Then we have a long stretch in which all the verses end with a clear '*yah*' final syllable. This passage takes us through the scenes of ruin in this world and in the life to come, as well as those of joy and lamentation when personal records are given. Then the ending changes to '*ooh*' when the judgement is pronounced. When the basis of the judgement is outlined in all seriousness, the ending again changes to give us a firm and final sound formed of a long '*e*' followed by either '*m*' or '*n*'. This change of the last consonant and the vowel preceding it, as well as the beat, is a clear phenomenon that parallels the change of scene, image and aura. It fits perfectly with the subject matter and the images drawn. It contributes to the powerful effect the *sūrah* has generally. Having said all this, I would like to conclude by saying that the *sūrah* itself is far more powerful than can be shown by any analysis or comment anyone can make.

Al-Ḥāqqah
(The Inevitable Truth)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

The Inevitable Truth! (1)

الْحَاقَّةُ (١)

What is the Inevitable Truth? (2)

مَا الْحَاقَّةُ (٢)

Would that you knew what the Inevitable Truth is! (3)

وَمَا أَدْرَاكَ مَا الْحَاقَّةُ (٣)

The people of Thamūd and ʿĀd denied the Striker. (4)

كَذَّبَتْ ثَمُودُ وَعَادٌ بِالْقَارِعَةِ (٤)

The Thamūd were destroyed by an overwhelming event, (5)

فَأَمَّا ثَمُودُ فَأُهْلِكُوا بِالطَّاغِيَةِ (٥)

while the ʿĀd were destroyed by a furiously howling wind, (6)

وَأَمَّا عَادٌ فَأُهْلِكُوا بِرِيحٍ صَرْصَرٍ عَاتِيَةٍ (٦)

which He caused to rage upon them for seven nights and eight decisive days. You could see their people lying dead, like uprooted trunks of hollow palm trees. (7)

سَخَّرَهَا عَلَيْهِمْ سَبْعَ لَيَالٍ وَثَمَانِيَةَ أَيَّامٍ حُسُومًا فَتَرَى الْقَوْمَ فِيهَا صَرْعَىٰ كَأَنَّهُمْ أَعْجَازُ نَخْلٍ خَاوِيَةٍ (٧)

Can you see any trace of them now? (8)

فَهَلْ تَرَىٰ لَهُم مِّن بَاقِيَةٍ (٨)

Pharaoh, too, and those before him, and the ruined cities – all indulged in sin, (9)

وَجَاءَ فِرْعَوْنُ وَمَن قَبْلَهُ وَالْمُؤْتَفِكَاتُ بِالْخَاطِئَةِ (٩)

فَعَصَوْا رَسُولَ رَبِّهِمْ فَأَخَذَهُمْ أَخْذَةً رَّابِيَةً ﴿١٠﴾

and disobeyed their Lord's messenger; and so He took them to task with an ever-tightening grip. (10)

إِنَّا لَمَّا طَغَا الْمَاءُ حَمَلْنَاكُمْ فِي الْجَارِيَةِ ﴿١١﴾

When the waters rose high, We carried you in the floating Ark, (11)

لِنَجْعَلَهَا لَكُمْ تَذْكِرَةً وَتَعِيَهَا أُذُنٌ وَاعِيَةٌ ﴿١٢﴾

making it all a lasting reminder for you, so that attentive ears may take heed. (12)

فَإِذَا نُفِخَ فِي الصُّورِ نَفْخَةٌ وَاحِدَةٌ ﴿١٣﴾

When the trumpet is sounded a single time, (13)

وَحُمِلَتِ الْأَرْضُ وَالْجِبَالُ فَدُكَّتَا دَكَّةً وَاحِدَةً ﴿١٤﴾

and the earth and mountains are lifted up and with one mighty crash are flattened, (14)

فَيَوْمَئِذٍ وَقَعَتِ الْوَاقِعَةُ ﴿١٥﴾

that which is certain to happen will on that day have come to pass. (15)

وَانشَقَّتِ السَّمَاءُ فَهِيَ يَوْمَئِذٍ وَاهِيَةٌ ﴿١٦﴾

The sky will be rent asunder, for, it will have become frail on that day. (16)

وَالْمَلَكُ عَلَىٰ أَرْجَائِهَا وَيَحْمِلُ عَرْشَ رَبِّكَ فَوْقَهُمْ يَوْمَئِذٍ ثَمَانِيَةٌ ﴿١٧﴾

The angels will stand on all its sides and, on that day, eight of them will bear aloft the Throne of your Lord. (17)

يَوْمَئِذٍ تُعْرَضُونَ لَا تَخْفَىٰ مِنكُمْ خَافِيَةٌ ﴿١٨﴾

On that day you shall be brought to judgement and none of your secrets will remain hidden. (18)

He who is given his record in his right hand will say, 'Come you all! Read this my record. (19)

فَأَمَّا مَنْ أُوتِيَ كِتَٰبَهُۥ بِيَمِينِهِۦ فَيَقُولُ هَآؤُمُ ٱقْرَءُوا۟ كِتَٰبِيَهْ ﴿١٩﴾

I certainly knew that one day I would have to face my account.' (20)

إِنِّى ظَنَنتُ أَنِّى مُلَٰقٍ حِسَابِيَهْ ﴿٢٠﴾

He will be in a happy state of life, (21)

فَهُوَ فِى عِيشَةٍ رَّاضِيَةٍ ﴿٢١﴾

in a lofty garden, (22)

فِى جَنَّةٍ عَالِيَةٍ ﴿٢٢﴾

with its fruits within easy reach. (23)

قُطُوفُهَا دَانِيَةٌ ﴿٢٣﴾

'Eat and drink to your heart's content as a reward for what you have done in days gone by.' (24)

كُلُوا۟ وَٱشْرَبُوا۟ هَنِيٓـًٔۢا بِمَآ أَسْلَفْتُمْ فِى ٱلْأَيَّامِ ٱلْخَالِيَةِ ﴿٢٤﴾

But he who is given his record in his left hand will say, 'Would that I had never been shown my record (25)

وَأَمَّا مَنْ أُوتِىَ كِتَٰبَهُۥ بِشِمَالِهِۦ فَيَقُولُ يَٰلَيْتَنِى لَمْ أُوتَ كِتَٰبِيَهْ ﴿٢٥﴾

and knew nothing of my account! (26)

وَلَمْ أَدْرِ مَا حِسَابِيَهْ ﴿٢٦﴾

Would that death had been the end of me! (27)

يَٰلَيْتَهَا كَانَتِ ٱلْقَاضِيَةَ ﴿٢٧﴾

Nothing has my wealth availed me. (28)

مَآ أَغْنَىٰ عَنِّى مَالِيَهْ ﴿٢٨﴾

I am now bereft of all my power.' (29)

هَلَكَ عَنِّي سُلْطَٰنِيَهْ ﴿٢٩﴾

'Lay hold of him and shackle him, (30)

خُذُوهُ فَغُلُّوهُ ﴿٣٠﴾

and burn him in the fire of hell, (31)

ثُمَّ ٱلْجَحِيمَ صَلُّوهُ ﴿٣١﴾

and then fasten him in a chain seventy cubits long.' (32)

ثُمَّ فِي سِلْسِلَةٍ ذَرْعُهَا سَبْعُونَ ذِرَاعًا فَٱسْلُكُوهُ ﴿٣٢﴾

He did not believe in God Almighty, (33)

إِنَّهُۥ كَانَ لَا يُؤْمِنُ بِٱللَّهِ ٱلْعَظِيمِ ﴿٣٣﴾

and he never encouraged feeding the needy. (34)

وَلَا يَحُضُّ عَلَىٰ طَعَامِ ٱلْمِسْكِينِ ﴿٣٤﴾

So, no friend has he here today, (35)

فَلَيْسَ لَهُ ٱلْيَوْمَ هَٰهُنَا حَمِيمٌ ﴿٣٥﴾

nor any food except the filth (36)

وَلَا طَعَامٌ إِلَّا مِنْ غِسْلِينٍ ﴿٣٦﴾

that none other than the sinners eat. (37)

لَّا يَأْكُلُهُۥٓ إِلَّا ٱلْخَٰطِـُٔونَ ﴿٣٧﴾

I need not swear by what you can see (38)

فَلَآ أُقْسِمُ بِمَا تُبْصِرُونَ ﴿٣٨﴾

and what you cannot see: (39)

وَمَا لَا تُبْصِرُونَ ﴿٣٩﴾

this [Qur'ān] is the word of a noble Messenger, (40)

إِنَّهُۥ لَقَوْلُ رَسُولٍ كَرِيمٍ ﴿٤٠﴾

not the word of a poet – how little you believe! (41)

وَمَا هُوَ بِقَوْلِ شَاعِرٍ ۚ قَلِيلًا مَّا تُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿٤١﴾

Nor the word of a soothsayer – how little you reflect! (42)

وَلَا بِقَوْلِ كَاهِنٍ ۚ قَلِيلًا مَّا تَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿٤٢﴾

This [Qur'ān] is a revelation from the Lord of all the worlds. (43)

تَنزِيلٌ مِّن رَّبِّ ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٤٣﴾

Had he attributed some fabrications to Us, (44)

وَلَوْ تَقَوَّلَ عَلَيْنَا بَعْضَ ٱلْأَقَاوِيلِ ﴿٤٤﴾

We would indeed have seized him by the right hand (45)

لَأَخَذْنَا مِنْهُ بِٱلْيَمِينِ ﴿٤٥﴾

and cut off his life-vein, (46)

ثُمَّ لَقَطَعْنَا مِنْهُ ٱلْوَتِينَ ﴿٤٦﴾

and none of you could have saved him. (47)

فَمَا مِنكُم مِّنْ أَحَدٍ عَنْهُ حَٰجِزِينَ ﴿٤٧﴾

This [Qur'ān] is indeed a reminder to the God-fearing. (48)

وَإِنَّهُۥ لَتَذْكِرَةٌ لِّلْمُتَّقِينَ ﴿٤٨﴾

We well know that among you are some who deny its truth. (49)

وَإِنَّا لَنَعْلَمُ أَنَّ مِنكُم مُّكَذِّبِينَ ﴿٤٩﴾

Yet it will be a cause of bitter regret for the unbelievers. (50)

وَإِنَّهُۥ لَحَسْرَةٌ عَلَى ٱلْكَٰفِرِينَ ﴿٥٠﴾

It is indeed truth absolute. (51)

وَإِنَّهُۥ لَحَقُّ ٱلْيَقِينِ ﴿٥١﴾

Extol, then, the glory of the name of your Lord, the Supreme. (52)

فَسَبِّحْ بِٱسْمِ رَبِّكَ ٱلْعَظِيمِ ﴿٥٢﴾

True and Inevitable

> *The Inevitable Truth! What is the Inevitable Truth? Would that you knew what the Inevitable Truth is!* (Verses 1–3)

Most of this *sūrah* is taken up with scenes, images and events of the resurrection. Indeed, the *sūrah*'s very title *al-Ḥāqqah*, or the Inevitable Truth resounds with the same. It is a name chosen for both its meaning and the sounds it delivers. *Al-Ḥāqqah* is something that falls due and then takes place, or it becomes inevitable and puts forward its judgement, or it manifests the truth. All these meanings are clear and decisive, fitting with the subject matter and drift of the *sūrah*. As we have already stated, the name chosen provides a powerful beat, one that is in harmony with the *sūrah*'s meaning and which contributes to the intended atmosphere. It prepares us for what is about to befall the unbelievers in this world and in the life to come.

The ambience throughout the *sūrah* is one of seriousness, firmness, awe and fear. In addition to what we have said in the Prologue, it imparts to us a feeling of God's absolute power on the one hand and man's powerlessness on the other. It mentions how God's power can firmly take man to task, in this world and in the next, should he deviate from the code of living God wants man to implement. It is the code God's messengers outlined for people. This code is not laid down so that it can be ignored or abandoned; it is there to be respected and put into practice. Otherwise, God's painful punishment may be meted out at any time.

The words used here, their very sound, meaning and construction contribute to this ambience. The *sūrah* starts with one Arabic word, *al-Ḥāqqah*, translated here as 'the Inevitable Truth'. It is mentioned on its own as a subject that has no predicate. This is followed by a question that emphasizes the fact that the event referred to is extremely grave. This question is followed by the spreading of an air of mystery, so as to take the subject matter out of the area of man's knowledge, "*Would that you knew what the Inevitable Truth is!*" (Verse 3) The *sūrah*, however, does not answer the question. Instead, it leaves us stirring at this awesome event about which we know nothing. Indeed, we cannot know anything about it because it is beyond our knowledge.

Unbelievers' Fates

The *sūrah* begins with an account of the terrible fates met by different communities of unbelievers. They were all dealt with in a decisive and swift manner because the issue in question is very serious and does not allow denial. Those who persist with such denial cannot escape punishment:

> *The people of Thamūd and 'Ād denied the Striker. The Thamūd were destroyed by an overwhelming event, while the 'Ād were destroyed by a furiously howling wind, which He caused to rage upon them for seven nights and eight decisive days. You could see their people lying dead, like uprooted trunks of hollow palm trees. Can you see any trace of them now?* (Verses 4–8)

Al-Qāri'ah, or The Striker, is another name for Resurrection Day, complementing as it does *al-Ḥāqqah,* the Inevitable Truth. This means that in addition to its being true and inevitable, it also strikes like two solid objects hammering against each other. The Striker inflicts hearts with terror and delivers a crushing blow upon the universe. By its very sound, it strikes loudly, crushing everything and everyone around. Both the Thamūd and the 'Ād denied it, saying that it was untrue. Let us see then what the result of such denial was:

"*The Thamūd were destroyed by an overwhelming event.*" (Verse 5) As mentioned elsewhere in the Qur'ān, the people of Thamūd used to live in the area of al-Ḥijr to the north of Ḥijāz, close to today's Palestine. They were destroyed by an event named elsewhere as a '*stunning blast*'. Here, the *sūrah* does not mention this blast but rather describes it as an '*overwhelming event*', as this fits better with the atmosphere of catastrophe that characterizes the *sūrah*. Moreover, the note the Arabic word *ṭāghiyah* strikes is consistent with the verse endings in the present passage. This short single verse is enough to completely engulf the Thamūd, leaving no trace of them.

The Thamūd's fate was swift and sudden, a single blast overwhelming them all. By contrast, the *sūrah* gives us a detailed account of the 'Ād's fate, which was accomplished over seven nights and eight decisive days.

The 'Ād were destroyed by a howling, extremely cold wind described here as *ṣarṣar*. Whilst this carries strong connotations of such '*howling*', this is still not enough. Its howling is clearly described as furious, and fits with the fact that the 'Ād were arrogant and tyrannical in their dealings with others. They used to live at al-Aḥqāf in southern Arabia, in the area between Yemen and Ḥadramawt. This howling wind, furious as it was, "*He caused to rage upon them for seven nights and eight decisive days.*" (Verse 7) The *sūrah* gives the exact duration of this hurricane that hit for so long so as to draw an image of the scene after it was all over: "*You could see their people lying dead, like uprooted trunks of hollow palm trees.*" (Verse 7) The image is detailed, pressed on our minds so that we can see its every detail. The people of the 'Ād are '*lying dead*' everywhere, and they look '*like uprooted tree trunks*', but these trunks are '*hollow*', eaten from inside and no longer able to stand upright. They are thrown on the ground, lifeless. The sad silence of death now reigns after the furiously howling hurricane. So, what is left of them? The answer is expressed in a question for which no one bothers to hear an answer: "*Can you see any trace of them now?*" (Verse 8)

Such was the fates of the 'Ād and Thamūd. Other communities that denied the divine faith also suffered similar fates. In two short verses, the *sūrah* sums up several of these:

> *Pharaoh, too, and those before him, and the ruined cities – all indulged in sin, and disobeyed their Lord's messenger; and so He took them to task with an ever-tightening grip.* (Verses 9–10)

Pharaoh, in Egypt, was the one who opposed the Prophet Moses, but the *sūrah* gives no details of '*those before him*'. The '*ruined cities*' were those of Sodom and Gomorrah. The *sūrah* sums up the deeds of all these communities in a short phrase saying that they '*all indulged in sin*'. It explains that they all '*disobeyed their Lord's messenger.*' The fact is that these communities had several messengers whom they disobeyed, yet these messengers advocated the same truth, and their messages were essentially the same. Hence, they are like one messenger, representing a single truth. This is one of the most inspiring touches of the Qur'ānic style. Again the *sūrah* sums up their fates in a way that combines

swiftness with strong and decisive action: "*He took them to task with an ever-tightening grip.*" (Verse 10)

The *sūrah* then gives us an image of the great floods and the floating Ark on the surface, in reference to the fate suffered by the people of Noah when they rejected God's message. Here the *sūrah* reminds people of God's favour as He saved their forefathers. Yet they do not take heed or give thanks:

> *When the waters rose high, We carried you in the floating Ark, making it all a lasting reminder for you, so that attentive ears may take heed.* (Verses 11–12)

The images of the floods and the floating Ark fit well with the other scenes portrayed in the *sūrah*, and share the same verse endings so as to rhyme with other verses describing these fates. The fact is that the *sūrah* gives all this as "*a lasting reminder for you, so that attentive ears may take heed.*" This should inspire the hearts and ears of people who continue to deny the truth after all that happened before them and the warnings that were given to earlier communities. Indeed signs and lessons, as well as favours and blessings, have been given in abundance, but people need to wake up and take heed.

Greater Horrors

All such devastation and catastrophe seems, however, to be exceedingly small when compared to the horrors of the Striker, the Inevitable Truth, which those unbelievers deny, even though they have seen what befell earlier communities that denied it. These fates, terrible catastrophes in their own right, are of a limited nature compared to the absolute calamity that the Striker brings about on the day to be witnessed by all. Having thus introduced this horror in general terms, the *sūrah* now portrays its details:

> *When the trumpet is sounded a single time, and the earth and mountains are lifted up and with one mighty crash are flattened, that which is certain to happen will on that day have come to pass. The*

> *sky will be rent asunder, for, it will have become frail on that day. The angels will stand on all its sides and, on that day, eight of them will bear aloft the Throne of your Lord.* (Verses 13–17)

We believe that there will be a single sounding of the trumpet and that this will be followed by these events. We do not know any details, however, because these events belong to a world about which we have no information except these texts. We have no other source to refer to. Moreover, no further details can add to the significance of these statements. To try to learn such details is a useless exercise which we are instructed not to resort to. When the trumpet is sounded once, a huge movement will take place: "*the earth and mountains are lifted up and with one mighty crash are flattened.*" (Verse 14) The image of the earth and the mountains being lifted high and thrown so that they are crushed and levelled is absolutely terrifying. We walk over the earth in peace and reassurance, feeling that it is firm in its position. We look at the mountains and feel how stable and firmly placed they are. Yet both are lifted and sent crashing, as if they were a ball in a child's hand. How small man must feel, and how small is his world, compared with such great power.

What happens when all this takes place? It is the very thing the *sūrah* is speaking about: "*that which is certain to happen will on that day have come to pass.*" (Verse 15) What is certain is the Day of Resurrection, which is called by many names such as *al-Ḥāqqah*, or the Inevitable Truth, *al-Qāri'ah*, or the Striker, *al-Wāqi'ah*, or the Happening, as if the certainty of its happening is part of its very nature. Using this last name here is deliberate, intended to give a particular impression countering all doubt and denial. Yet this is not all. The skies will also be seriously affected: "*The sky will be rent asunder, for, it will have become frail on that day.*" (Verse 16) We do not know for certain to what the term '*the sky*' refers to here, but this statement and similar ones referring to celestial events on that great day speak of a collapse of the order that keeps the universe functioning according to an accurate and fascinating plan. Once this perfect order collapses, all its different parts will be in chaos.

It is mere coincidence that astronomers are now predicting that something of this nature will take place bringing about an end to the

world. Their predictions are based on scientific observations and the little they have come to know of the nature of the universe. We, for our part, almost witness these scenes as they unfold before us through the Qur'ānic texts informing us of things that are absolutely certain because they come from God, the Creator who knows what He has created. We almost see the earth being lifted high, with its mountains that are massive by our measure, but infinitely small when compared to the universe. We see them all sent crashing, being levelled. We see the sky torn apart, frail, while the planets are scattered everywhere. We see all this through the Qur'ān as it draws its images and plants them before our eyes.

An air of majesty then spreads over the entire stage. All the sounds of the trumpet, the crashing, the rending asunder and the scattering of stars then dies down, and we have an image of the Almighty's Throne: "*The angels will stand on all its sides and, on that day, eight of them will bear aloft the Throne of your Lord.*" (Verse 17) The angels are on all sides of the sky that has been torn and rent asunder, and the throne is there above them carried by eight of their number. Are they eight angels, or eight rows of angels, or eight classes, or some other eight known only to God? We do not know who or what they are, just as we do not know what the throne is like, or how it is carried. Knowledge of all these details has not been imparted to us, and God wants us to know of them only what He tells us. Therefore, we leave aside all details of these unknown matters and concentrate instead on the majestic aura they impart to the whole scene. This is what we are meant to feel as the events of that awesome day are reported.

> *On that day you shall be brought to judgement and none of your secrets will remain hidden.* (Verse 18)

All are exposed: bodies, souls, consciences, actions and destinies. All curtains that used to hide secrets are lifted, and souls are laid bare just like bodies. What used to be concealed is now in full view. Man is without any of his precautions, schemings and plannings. What he was keen to conceal, even from himself, is there to be seen by all. Such disgrace and in front of everyone! As for God, He has always been fully

aware of every little thing, even that which is most deeply hidden, but man, accustomed to all sorts of concealment on earth, does not fully appreciate this. Now, on the Day of Judgement, when everything is laid bare throughout the universe, he realizes this. The earth is flattened and has no corner or protrusion to conceal anything; the sky is rent asunder showing what once was behind it; all bodies are without cover, and souls are left bare concealing no secret. The situation is very difficult indeed; harder to accept than the flattening of the earth and the mountains or the tearing of the sky apart. It leaves man bare in body, soul, history, and action. Not just this but he is also exposed in front of all these huge numbers of creatures – humans, *jinn* and angels – in front of the Almighty and under His majestic throne.

Man has a very complex nature. There are within his soul many corners and pathways where he hides his feelings, whims, yearnings, thoughts, secrets and private matters. Imagine how a snail quickly withdraws into its shell when it feels danger, hiding itself completely. Should man realize that an eye manages to see what he is keen to conceal, or that a glance exposes something he wants to remain hidden, he does much more than a snail sensing danger. He is deeply hurt when someone looks into his inner secrets. So how will man feel when he stands truly naked in body, heart, feeling and soul; when he has nothing to cover himself with, when he is under the throne of the Almighty and before this great assembly of creatures? This is the most painful of all situations.

Overwhelmed with Joy

The *sūrah* now presents two images, one of the winners and one of the losers. This is again done as though it is happening at this very instant:

> *He who is given his record in his right hand will say, 'Come you all! Read this my record. I certainly knew that one day I would have to face my account.' He will be in a happy state of life, in a lofty garden, with its fruits within easy reach. 'Eat and drink to your heart's content as a reward for what you have done in days gone by.'* (Verses 19–24)

Taking one's record with one's right or left hand, or behind one's back may be a statement expressing a material fact, or it may be an idiomatic expression, following standard rules of Arabic as it refers to the good direction as the right and the evil one as the left or the back. Whichever may be the case, the meaning remains the same. It merits no argument as any such argument spoils the effect of what takes place on this awesome day. What we see here is a person who is given his record and realizes that he has won. The hardship of the day is gone, and he moves along, overjoyed, among the great multitude. His happiness overflows and he calls to all people, saying: "*Come you all! Read this my record.*" (Verse 19) In his overwhelming delight, he says that he never thought that he would be spared. He expected to have to account for his deeds, and that means suffering. As one *ḥadīth* states, 'Ā'ishah quotes the Prophet as saying: "Whoever is held to account will be tormented." She then asked the Prophet: "How come, when God says: '*He who is given his record in his right hand will in time have a lenient reckoning and return rejoicing to his people.*'" (84: 7–9) He said: "This merely speaks of presentation. Whoever is questioned about his deeds on the Day of Judgement will indeed be in ruin." [Related by al-Bukhārī, Muslim, Abū Dāwūd and al-Tirmidhī.]

Another report on the authority of Abū 'Uthmān states: "A believer is given his record in his right hand where God gives him shelter. He reads first his bad deeds. Every time he reads such a negative item, his colour changes, then he begins to read his good deeds and his face regains its colour. He looks around and finds that his bad deeds have been replaced by good ones. It is at this point that such a person calls out to all people to come and read his record."

It is reported on the authority of 'Abdullāh ibn Ḥanẓalah, a Companion of the Prophet who was a martyr in the Battle of Uḥud: "God stops His servant on the Day of Judgement and shows him his evil deeds written on the back of his record. He asks him: 'Have you done this?' He confirms that he did. God says to him: 'I did not make it public during your life, and today I am forgiving you these.' He is then given his record of good deeds in his right hand. As for the unbelievers and the hypocrites, it is concerning these that "*witnesses shall say: 'These are they who lied against their Lord.' God's curse is on the wrongdoers.*"

(11: 18) The details of blessings made ready for such people are then announced before all. The account given here of these blessings includes some aspects of material comfort. This suited the state of those addressed by the Qur'ān at the time. They were still newcomers to Islam; it had not yet given its distinctive hue to their feelings, nor had they had the chance to appreciate luxuries higher than any material comfort: "*He will be in a happy state of life, in a lofty garden, with its fruits within easy reach. 'Eat and drink to your heart's ontent as a reward for what you have done in days gone by.'*" (Verses 21–24)

Such blessings and comforts are coupled with a special honour that is felt in the fact that the *sūrah* makes its address directly to those deserving of it, saying to them to eat and drink as they please. This type of blessing is the one those who were the first to be addressed by the Qur'ān could appreciate in the early stages of their new bond with God. Their feelings had not yet attained the sublime level that finds in being close to God what is much higher than any material comfort or luxury. Yet this type can satisfy the needs of many people across many generations.

At the Opposite End

> *But he who is given his record in his left hand will say, 'Would that I had never been shown my record and knew nothing of my account! Would that death had been the end of me! Nothing has my wealth availed me. I am now bereft of all my power.' 'Lay hold of him and shackle him, and burn him in the fire of hell, and then fasten him in a chain seventy cubits long.' He did not believe in God Almighty, and he never encouraged feeding the needy. So, no friend has he here today, nor any food except the filth that none other than the sinners eat.* (Verses 25–37)

"*But he who is given his record in his left hand,*" and knows that his bad deeds are reckoned against him realizes that his fate is one of suffering. He stands among this great multitude full of sorrow, broken. He will say: "*Would that I had never been shown my record and knew nothing of my account! Would that death had been the end of me! Nothing has my wealth availed me. I am now bereft of all my power.*" (Verses 25–29)

Long is his lamentation, miserable his tone and desperate his words. The *sūrah* presents his reaction at length and the listener almost feels his endless lamentation. This is another aspect of the Qur'ānic style: some situations are described at length while others are given a quick and short presentation, depending on the effect the Qur'ān wants to impart. In this case, the *sūrah* wants to bring this image of lamentation alive before us, so that we feel it thoroughly. Therefore, it harps long on its details. We see this miserable person wishing he had never witnessed this gathering, never been given his record, and knowing nothing of his account. He would have loved for the Striker to have spelt his absolute end, removing him from all existence. He bemoans that nothing of what he used to rate highly or treasure appears to be of any use or value: "*Nothing has my wealth availed me. I am now bereft of all my power.*" (Verses 28–29) The ending of these very short verses, with a strongly aspirated '*h*' preceded by a '*ya*' sound that comes after a long '*a*', adds to the tone of sorrow and grief. It is all part of the very clear ambience the *sūrah* generates.

This long, sorrowful lamentation is only interrupted by a decisive order given from on high:

> *Lay hold of him and shackle him, and burn him in the fire of hell, and then fasten him in a chain seventy cubits long.* (Verses 30–32)

A command is given by God Almighty, and everyone in the universe moves against this miserable creature. Those to whom the command is issued will move swiftly from all corners. A *ḥadīth* related by Ibn Abī Ḥātim states: "When God says, '*lay hold of him,*' seventy thousand angels swiftly take him. Each one of these angels can, in one gesture, cast seventy thousand creatures into hell."

"*And shackle him.*" The first angel to so hold him will immediately put the shackles around him. "*And burn him in the fire of hell.*" (Verse 31) We almost hear the sound of the fire as it burns such people. "*And then fasten him in a chain seventy cubits long.*" (Verse 32) One cubit of this chain is enough, but the impression intended here is one of elongation and the mention of '*seventy cubits*' gives us this sense of perpetuity.

Now that the command has been given, its justification is announced for all to know:

He did not believe in God Almighty, and he never encouraged feeding the needy. (Verses 33–34)

This is a person whose heart is devoid of faith and compassion. Thus, the only place fit for him is the fire. With a heart that has no trace of faith, he is ruined, like a barren land engulfed in darkness. He is below the level of animals, and indeed below the level of inanimate objects. Everything in the universe believes in God and glorifies Him, and as such they maintain their bond with their source of existence. This person, on the other hand, severed his ties with God, and therefore has no tie with the universe.

Likewise, his heart is devoid of compassion. A needy person is one who desperately needs compassion, but this one does not feel for his fellow humans in need. He does not encourage feeding them, which is a step further than simply providing the needy with food. It is a step that suggests a social duty that requires believers to encourage one another to undertake. It is closely related to faith, mentioned here after faith and given its value in God's measure:

So, no friend has he here today, nor any food except the filth that none other than the sinners eat. (Verses 35–37)

This complements the announcement from on high concerning the fate of such a miserable person. Since he had no faith in God and did not encourage the feeding of the needy, he has no friends, and he is deprived of all favours. His food is the filth that pours out of the people of hell. Such is the food that serves well those hardened hearts that are devoid of all compassion. It is a type of food that "*none other than the sinners eat.*" (Verse 37) He is essentially one of the sinners.

Such are the characteristics of the person that deserves the divine punishment of being cast into hell, tied with a chain seventy cubits long. This is the worst punishment meted out in hell. What will happen, then, to those who actually prevent giving food to the needy and who make women, children and the elderly people starve, hitting hard at those who give them something to eat or a piece of clothing to wear in

the cold winter months? Such people do exist from time to time.[1] So how will God requite them?

Perhaps this terrifying scene was drawn because the Arabian environment was hard and cruel. It needed to have such shocking images to awaken its better feelings. Such environments do occur throughout history. Furthermore, these may exist side by side with softer and more responsive ones. The earth is wide, and on it a great variety of people, depicting a similarly great variety of psychologies, exist. The Qur'ān addresses every level and every soul in a way that finds its effect. Today, the population of the earth includes some very hardened, cruel hearts. These can only be influenced when addressed with words of fire, such as the ones used in this *sūrah*.

The Qur'ānic Revelations

The *sūrah* now makes a categorical statement defining the nature of the Qur'ān recited by God's noble Messenger, but received by the Arabs with derision and ridicule:

> *I need not swear by what you can see and what you cannot see: this [Qur'ān] is the word of a noble Messenger, not the word of a poet – how little you believe! Nor the word of a soothsayer – how little you reflect! This [Qur'ān] is a revelation from the Lord of all the worlds.* (Verses 38–43)

The statement is very clear, definite and certain. Hence, it requires no oath to prove it or to confirm its source. It comes from the truth. It requires no further confirmation. "*I need not swear by what you can see and what you cannot see.*" (Verses 38–39) This is an expression that imparts a sense of greatness to both the visible world and the world beyond. Needless to say, the universe is far greater than what people can say, and indeed what they can imagine. Indeed, all that humans

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1. During Nasser's reign in Egypt, anyone who donated something to alleviate the plight of families of imprisoned members of the Muslim Brotherhood was liable to five years imprisonment. – Editor's note.

can see and imagine is what they need to fulfil their role of building the earth, as God has willed placing them in charge of it. Within the great universe, their planet, the earth, is no more than a barely visible particle. Humans cannot go beyond what they are allowed to see and comprehend of this vast universe, its laws and secrets.

"*I need not swear by what you can see and what you cannot see.*" Such a statement tells us that beyond the reach of our faculties of perception there are worlds and secrets of which we know nothing. It thus broadens our vision of the universe and the truth. The universe is not confined to what we can see or comprehend with our limited faculties. After all, our task on earth is to build human life on it, and we have only been given what we need to fulfil this task. Yet when we appreciate this truth of our limited ability, and that there is a greater world beyond what we see, we can elevate ourselves above our needs and reach out to that source of perfect knowledge.

Those who confine themselves within what their senses can reach, using only their available tools, are wretched. They are imprisoned within a world that remains narrow despite its vastness. It is especially narrow when compared to the great universe. During different periods of history, some people, few or great in number, have been willing to imprison themselves, by their own hands, within the limits of their senses and what they see in the present world. They closed the windows of true light and knowledge that come from being in touch with the essential truth through faith. Some have gone even further and have sought to close these windows to all people. They did so in the name of *jāhiliyyah* at one time, and in the name of secularism at another. Both are types of imprisonment that bring endless misery, because they both involve isolation from the great sources of light and knowledge.

During the present century,[2] science has begun to rid itself of the fetters with which it shackled itself over the previous two centuries. It has started, through its own experiments, to regain its light. It had previously been on the loose, aiming to break from the confinement imposed on it by the Church. Now it knows its limits; it knows that its limited tools lead to what is beyond limit in this great universe. Now we

2. The author is referring here to the twentieth century. – Editor's note.

see a new call to faith made by scientists who have found their humility. All this appears to herald a new era of open-mindedness to end that of confinement in the narrow cell of materialism.

Alexis Carrel, a French surgeon and biologist who pioneered research in different areas and was the Nobel Prize winner for medicine in 1912, said: "This vast universe is full of active minds other than ours. If the human mind depends solely on its own guidance, it will be lost in the maze that surrounds it. Prayer is one method of communication with the minds around us and with the eternal mind that controls the destinies of all worlds, whether these are apparent to us or concealed from us."

"A feeling of holiness, together with other spiritual activities, have a special role in life because these bring us in contact with the spiritual world and its great mystery."[3]

Another French scientist who contributed to research in anatomy and physics, and who worked with the Curies, wrote:

> Many intelligent and good intentioned people think that they cannot believe in God because they cannot imagine His nature. Yet an honest person who has the scientific drive does not need to imagine God's nature any more than a physicist needs to understand the nature of electricity. In both cases, our imagination remains deficient and invalid. It is impossible to imagine electricity in material terms, yet its effects are more concrete than a piece of wood.[4]

Sir Arthur Thomson, a famous Scottish naturalist and biologist, wrote: "We live at a time when the hard earth crust is becoming transparent, and the atmosphere is losing its material structure. Hence, our time is least suited to taking a too materialistic view." He also wrote:

> A religious mind should not be sorry that a physicist does not move on from the study of nature to the Creator of nature, because this

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3. This quotation is taken from an Arabic translation quoted by Al-'Aqqād, A.M., *'Aqā'id al-Mufakkirīn fi al-Qarn al-'Ishrīn*. Unfortunately, Sayyid Quṭb does not give further details of the title.

4. Ibid.

is not the line a physicist follows. The conclusion may be much bigger than the premise if scientists would draw on their study of physics to make conclusions on metaphysics. We should, however, be glad because physicists have enabled the religious tendency to breathe in a scientific environment. This was most difficult in our parents' and grandparents' time... If physicists have no business discussing God, as mistakenly advocated by Mr Langdon Davies in his book on man and his world, we say that the best service science has done is to lead man to formulate a more noble and sublime concept of God. We say literally that science has given man a new sky and a new earth, motivating him to exert his maximum mental effort. As a result, man often finds that he can only be at peace when he moves beyond the realm of understanding into the realm of certainty and reliance on God.[5]

A. Cressy Morrison, a former Head of the New York Academy of Sciences, wrote:

> We do approach the vast abyss of the unknowable when we realize that all matter has scientifically become one by the acceptance of the theory that it is but a manifestation of a universal unit essentially electrical. But certainly chance has little place in the formation of the cosmos, for the mighty universe is governed by law.
>
> The rise of man the animal to a self-conscious reasoning being is too great a step to be taken by the process of material evolution or without creative purpose.
>
> If the reality of purpose is accepted, man as such may be a mechanism. But what operates this mechanism? For without operation it is useless. Science does not account for the operator, nor does Science say that it is material.
>
> Progress has now been sufficient for us to see that God seems to be giving man a spark of His own intelligence.[6]

5. Ibid.

6. Morrison, A. Cressy (1962), *Man Does Not Stand Alone*, Kingswood, Surrey: The World's Work (1913) Ltd., pp. 113–114.

Thus, using its own tools, science has started to break through the prison walls of materialism to breathe the fresh air to which the Qur'ān refers in statements like, "*I need not swear by what you can see and what you cannot see.*" (Verses 38–39) Yet in our own midst there are some who continue to try to close the windows with both their hands, to prevent the light from coming through, preferring to live in darkness. They do so in the name of science, without realizing that intellectually they lag behind science, and spiritually they lag behind religion. Moreover, they are backward, unable to move freely in pursuit of the truth. All this backwardness puts them in a position unworthy of man, the creature God has honoured.

God says that there is no need for an oath to prove the truth that "*this* [*Qur'ān*] *is the word of a noble Messenger, not the word of a poet – how little you believe! nor the word of a soothsayer – how little you reflect! This* [*Qur'ān*] *is a revelation from the Lord of all the worlds.*" (Verses 40–43) One of the false allegations the unbelievers in Makkah fabricated against the Qur'ān and the Prophet alleged that Muḥammad was a poet or soothsayer. They based this on their recognition that the Qur'ān was superior to anything human beings could say or compose. They used to imagine that every poet had a friend from among the *jinn* who brought him his fine poetry, and that a soothsayer similarly had contacts with the *jinn*, giving him knowledge and information unavailable to humans. Yet a quick glance at the nature of the Qur'ān, and the nature of poetry and soothsaying is sufficient to show how hollow such claims are.

Poetry has its musical beat and it may be full of fine and beautiful images, but it can never be confused with the Qur'ān. There is a fundamental difference between the two. The Qur'ān establishes a complete concept of life based on truth, a holistic approach and clear notions of God's existence, the universe and life. Poetry, on the other hand, is an expression of a series of charged reactions that rarely reflects a consistent vision of life and this in situations of pleasure and anger, freedom and restriction, love and hate, as well as other changing influences.

Furthermore, this consistent concept the Qur'ān lays down is initiated in whole and in part by the Qur'ān itself, and attributed to its divine source. Every aspect of this concept suggests that it is not of man's

making. It is not in the nature of human beings that they should come up with a complete concept of the universe. They have never done so in the past, nor will they ever be able to do so. We have a complete record of what human intelligence has come up with concerning the universe and the power that controls its system. It is all recorded in philosophical and intellectual works, as well as in poetry. When these are set side by side with the Qur'ānic concept, it is clearly apparent that the latter is not the work of a human mind. It is of a unique status, one that distinguishes it from all that the human intellect can produce.

The same applies to soothsaying. Never in human history, up to the present moment, has a soothsayer produced a complete code of living like the one delineated in the Qur'ān. All that soothsayers produce is limited to rhyming sentences containing some aspects of wisdom or ambiguous references.

Moreover, there are some Qur'ānic touches that are beyond man's ability to make. We discussed some of these when we commented on the relevant verses. For example, no one has ever portrayed comprehensive and accurate knowledge in images like those that follow: "*With Him are the keys to what lies beyond the reach of human perception: none knows them but He. He knows all that the land and sea contain; not a leaf falls but He knows it; and neither is there a grain in the earth's deep darkness, nor anything fresh or dry but is recorded in a clear book.*" (6: 59) "*He knows all that goes into the earth and all that comes out of it; all that descends from the skies and all that ascends to them. He is with you wherever you may be; and God sees all that you do.*" (57: 4) "*No female conceives or gives birth without His knowledge. No one attains to old age or has his life cut short unless it be thus laid down in [God's] decree. All this is easy for God.*" (35: 11)

No human being has ever, before or after the revelation of the Qur'ān, drawn an image of the power that holds the universe and conducts its affairs like this Qur'ānic verse: "*It is God alone who holds the celestial bodies and the earth, lest they deviate [from their courses]. If they should ever deviate, no one else could uphold them after Him.*" (35: 41) Nor has anyone ever attempted a description of the emergence of life in the universe and the deliberate balances that ensure its continuity in the universe similar to this Qur'ānic account: "*It is God who splits the grain and the*

fruit-stone. He brings forth the living out of that which is dead and the dead out of that which is alive. Such is God. How, then, are you deluded away from the truth? He is the One who causes the day to break. He has made the night to be [a source of stillness], and the sun and the moon for reckoning. All this is laid down by the will of the Almighty, the All-Knowing. It is He that has set up for you the stars, so that you may be guided by them in the deep darkness of land and sea. We have made Our revelations plain indeed to people who have knowledge. He it is who has brought you all into being from a single soul and has given you a dwelling and a place of sojourn. We have made Our revelations plain indeed to people of understanding. And He it is who sends down water from the sky with which We bring forth plants of every type and out of these We bring forth verdure from which We bring forth grain piled tight, packed on one another; and out of the spathe of the palm tree, dates in thick clusters; and gardens of vines; and the olive tree, and the pomegranate: all so alike, and yet so different. Behold their fruit when they come to fruition and ripen. Surely in these there are clear signs for people who truly believe." (6: 95–99)

Such universal touches are found in plenty in the Qur'ān. They have no parallel in the way people tend to express similar thoughts and meanings. This is evidence enough to determine the source of this book, regardless of any other evidence that may be drawn from what the book says or the circumstances of its revelation. Indeed, the whole idea of the Qur'ān being like poetry or soothsaying is flimsy. Even when the Qur'ān was still in its early stages of revelation, having provided only a small number of *sūrahs* and verses with this distinctive divine colour, this idea did not cut any grounds. The elders of the Quraysh used to reflect on it from time to time, rejecting this notion, but they were blinded to the truth because of their own personal interests. It is just like the Qur'ān says: "*Since they refuse to be guided by it, they will always say, 'This is an ancient falsehood.'*" (46: 11)

Authoritative biographical works about the Prophet report several events when the elders of the Quraysh privately rejected this whole idea. Ibn Iṣḥāq reports a meeting attended by a large number of Makkans and chaired, as it were, by al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah, who was one of the more respected Quraysh elders. This was held shortly before the pilgrimage season and the idea was to agree an appropriate strategy:

In his opening address, al-Walīd said: "Now that the pilgrimage season is approaching, people will start arriving from all over the place. They must have heard about your friend [meaning the Prophet]. So you had better agree what to say when you are asked about him. We must guard against having too many opinions, particularly if they are mutually contradictory."

When his audience asked his advice as to what they should say, he preferred to listen to their suggestions first. What concerned al-Walīd most was that the opinion they would come out with should take account of the fact that Muḥammad was asking people to listen to the Qur'ān, God's message, expressed in beautiful language and powerful style. The description they would attach to Muḥammad should also account for his persuasive, eloquent argument.

Descriptions like 'fortune-teller', 'madman', 'poet' and 'magician' were proposed. None was considered convincing by al-Walīd, who pointed out weaknesses in each, one after the other. He told his people that what Muḥammad said was nothing like what was said by such men. When nobody could suggest anything more plausible, they asked al-Walīd if he had a better suggestion.

He said: "What Muḥammad says is certainly beautiful. It is like a date tree with solid roots and rich fruit. Every one of these suggestions you have made is bound to be recognized as false. The least disputable one is to claim that he is a magician who repeats magic words which make a man fall out with his father, mother, wife and clan." They all approved of al-Walīd's suggestion and set about preparing their propaganda campaign to make the pilgrims wary of Muḥammad and unwilling to meet him.[7]

Another prominent Quraysh figure to speak out about the Qur'ān was al-Naḍr ibn al-Ḥārith, when the Quraysh felt at a loss after having failed to win any compromise from the Prophet. He outlined their predicament in the following way:

7. Salahi, Adil (2002), *Muhammad: Man and Prophet*, Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, pp. 119–120.

> People of Quraysh, you are confronted with a problem for which you have not been able to find a solution. When Muḥammad was still a young man living among you, he won general admiration because he always spoke the truth and his honesty could not be faulted. When he had grown grey, and started to preach whatever he is preaching to you, you began to allege that he was a sorcerer. By God, he is no sorcerer. We have seen magicians and their tricks in the past. You also accused him of being a fortune teller. By God, he is not one, for we have seen fortune tellers and how they repeat their rhyming phrases. You also claimed that he was a poet. Again I say that, by God, he is not a poet, for we have seen poets and listened to all types of poetry. You claimed that he was also a madman, but he is far from being so. We have seen what madness has done to people, and how it causes them to say incoherent things. I say, people of Quraysh, you have to look at this question very carefully, for you have a big problem on your hands.[8]

The similarity between what the two prominent Quraysh figures state is almost complete. This is not surprising, considering their unresolved dilemma of how to deal with the Qur'ān. We also mentioned in our discussion of the previous *sūrah*, The Pen, how 'Utbah ibn Rabī'ah reacted to the Qur'ān, when he tried to make some offers to the Prophet in the hope that he would stop advocating his message. When they alleged that Muḥammad was a sorcerer or a soothsayer, that was nothing but a stratagem, crude at times and cunning at others. It only needed a little reflection to realize that it was all wrong. Hence, there was no need for an oath of any sort to confirm that the Qur'ān was the word of a noble Messenger and a revelation from on high.

The statement that the Qur'ān "*is the word of a noble Messenger,*" does not mean that it is of his own composition. It rather means that it is a different type of word, one not uttered by a poet or a soothsayer. It can only be said by a Messenger from God, carrying it from the One who sent him. What confirms this meaning is the word '*Messenger*' being sent with it. He is neither a poet nor a soothsayer composing his own

8. Ibid., pp. 161–162.

words alone or with the assistance of a *jinnee*. This is further confirmed by the categorical statement that follows: "*This [Qur'ān] is a revelation from the Lord of all the worlds.*" (Verse 43)

In its negation of the Qur'ān being the word of a poet or a soothsayer, the *sūrah* uses the following two expressions: "*how little you believe!... how little you reflect!*" Thus, it completely negates their having any faith or resorting to any reflection. In a *ḥadīth*, the Prophet is described as 'little indulging in frivolous talk', which means that he did not say such things at all. Thus, the *sūrah* is describing those unbelievers as devoid of faith and reflection. No believer would say of the Prophet that he was a poet, and no man who reflects would say that he was a soothsayer.

A Very Serious Threat

As the *sūrah* draws to its conclusion, it issues a terrifying threat to anyone who fabricates something about the very serious matter of faith. The threat is issued so as to affirm the only possible scenario of the Prophet being very truthful and honest in delivering the message entrusted to him. The proof is that God has not punished him severely as He would have done so had the Prophet been anything other than that:

> *Had he attributed some fabrications to Us, We would indeed have seized him by the right hand and cut off his life-vein, and none of you could have saved him.* (Verses 44–47)

The import of these verses is confirmation that Muḥammad (peace be upon him) only told them the truth. Had he invented something other than what was revealed to him from on high, God would have killed him in the way the verses describe. Since this did not take place, the inevitable conclusion is that he was truthful.

Yet this confirmation is given in a scene that goes much further than the actual statement, adding some fearsome connotations, action and life. We see here the violent, scary action of someone being seized by the right hand and his life-vein being cut. It makes a clear impression of God's limitless power and mankind's utter weakness in comparison.

It adds a suggestion that this question of faith is so serious that it allows no complacency or leniency towards anyone, not even Muḥammad in his close relation with God. Furthermore, these verses carry a strong beat, spreading an air of fear and submission to God.

The *sūrah* concludes with a statement of the true nature of the Qur'ān:

> *This* [*Qur'ān*] *is indeed a reminder to the God-fearing. We well know that among you are some who deny its truth. Yet it will be a cause of bitter regret for the unbelievers. It is indeed truth absolute.* (Verses 48–51)

This Qur'ān reminds God-fearing hearts and they remember. The truth the Qur'ān states is ingrained in people's hearts, but the reminder brings it to the fore in the minds of those who are God-fearing. Others continue to be preoccupied, unaware, and as such they benefit nothing by the reminder that this book, the Qur'ān, provides. It is a fact that the God-fearing find in the Qur'ān life, light, knowledge and remembrance, but none of these is experienced by other people.

"*We well know that among you are some who deny its truth.*" (Verse 49) Yet this is of no consequence, and it alters nothing of the reality. Those who reject the truth are of no importance whatsoever. "*Yet it will be a cause of bitter regret for the unbelievers.*" (Verse 50) It elevates the status of the believers and brings down the unbelievers. It establishes the truth and undermines the falsehood to which the unbelievers cling. Moreover, it provides the argument against them when they face the reckoning on the Day of Judgement. They will lament their fate to which their rejection of the truth of the Qur'ān has led them. Thus, it is a source of bitter regret for all unbelievers in this life and in the life to come.

In the face of all denials and rejection by the unbelievers, the Qur'ān is "*indeed truth absolute.*" (Verse 51) It is not merely the truth, but the truth absolute, reconfirmed in absolute terms. In fact, every word in the Qur'ān is profoundly true; every verse carries enough evidence that it originates with God, who Himself is the Truth.

At this point, an instruction is given from on high to the noble Messenger. It comes at the right time and during the right situation: "*Extol, then, the glory of the name of your Lord, the Supreme.*" (Verse 52)

This is the most suitable action as it reflects acknowledgement of God's glory and man's position as God's servant. To glorify God is the feeling that a believer experiences after the last statement explaining the nature of the Qur'ān is given and after the long discussion of God Almighty's greatness.

SŪRAH 70

Al-Ma ʿārij

(Ways of Ascent)

Prologue

This *sūrah* may be described as being part of the long, slow, yet accurate and profound treatment of the traces of *jāhiliyyah*, or ignorance, within the human soul. This was most evident as the Qur'ān was being revealed in Makkah but is true wherever *jāhiliyyah* reigns. There may be differences in different situations, but these are superficial affecting only appearances. Alternatively, we may say that this *sūrah* represents a round in the long, hard battle the Qur'ān fights within the human soul, going deep inside it to eradicate all lingering traces of *jāhiliyyah*. This battle is greater and longer lasting than the wars the Muslims later had to fight against their many enemies. Moreover, these traces are more persistent and harder in their resistance than the great forces that were marshalled against the Islamic message, or those which continue to be raised against it by different *jāhiliyyah* societies.

The major issue the *sūrah* focuses on is that of the hereafter and peoples requital for what they do during their lives on earth, particularly the punishment suffered by the unbelievers. In order to establish the truth of the hereafter, the *sūrah* speaks of how the human soul reacts to situations of hardship and comfort. Such reactions differ greatly between a believer and one who is devoid of faith. The *sūrah* also provides an outline of the believers' main features, their feelings and

behaviour, and it states how they deserve to be honoured. It also shows that the unbelievers are held in disregard by God, and gives a picture of the humiliation prepared for them. It is a humiliation the arrogant thoroughly deserve. Furthermore, the *sūrah* establishes the fact that values, standards and scales applied by God are different from those which human beings uphold.

The Qur'ān administered its long treatment and fought its hard battle within the human soul equipped with nothing other than its own powerful argument. It achieved its great victory within its followers even before it had a sword with which to defend those believers, let alone force its enemies into submission.

Whoever reads the Qur'ān bearing in mind the events that took place during the Prophet's lifetime will not fail to appreciate the overpowering effect the Qur'ān had on those people in Makkah until they willingly accepted its lead. We see the wide range of styles the Qur'ān employs. It may face the human soul with a great flood of inspiring proofs and powerful effects; or it may use a powerful tool that leaves nothing of the traces of ignorance without completely crushing it, or it may confront the human soul with something akin to a hard whip that kindles sensation so that the pain it inflicts is very hard to bear. It alternates its approaches between a calm friendly appeal that wins hearts, a loud terrifying outcry that warns of an impending and great danger, a clear presentation of powerful and irrefutable argument, and a raising of hopes with the prospect of an appealing outcome. At times the Qur'ān moves physically through the human soul, going along its alleyways and round its corners, shedding light on each of these. It, thus, puts these before man so that he looks at them, making him dislike certain aspects, feel ashamed at others, and alert to his own reactions, which he normally overlooked. The Qur'ān uses hundreds of such touches, appeals and influences in conducting its long battle and administrating its slow treatment. We can follow these as we read the Qur'ān and learn how it achieved its great victory against the stiff resistance the human soul put up from within. The present *sūrah* is one instalment of this Qur'ānic endeavour to establish the truth of the hereafter and other related truths.

The preceding *sūrah*, The Inevitable Truth, aimed to establish the same truth of the hereafter, but the methods employed in both *sūrahs*

are widely different. The line followed in the preceding *sūrah* aimed to show the great universal upheaval taking place on the Day of Judgement through terror-striking images such as: "*When the trumpet is sounded a single time, and the earth and mountains are lifted up and with one mighty crash are flattened, that which is certain to happen will on that day have come to pass. The sky will be rent asunder, for, it will have become frail on that day.*" (69: 13–16) It also depicts the awesome nature of that day in a majestic scene: "*The angels will stand on all its sides and, on that day, eight of them will bear aloft the Throne of your Lord.*" (69: 17) It leaves us shaken as it describes how everything is laid bare: "*On that day you shall be brought to judgement and none of your secrets will remain hidden.*" (69: 18) The images so drawn of punishment add to the terrifying effect of the *sūrah*. This starts with the way judgement is announced: "*Lay hold of him and shackle him, and burn him in the fire of hell, and then fasten him in a chain seventy cubits long.*" (69: 30–32) Such feelings of terror are vividly reflected in the outcries of lamentation voiced by those receiving such judgement: "*Would that I had never been shown my record and knew nothing of my account! Would that death had been the end of me!*" (69: 25–27)

In the present *sūrah*, awesomeness is felt in the features, thoughts and movements of the human soul, rather than the universe and its great scenery. Even in the scenes of the universe presented in this *sūrah*, the fear appears to be almost psychological. It is certainly not the most prominent aspect. Indeed, such fear takes hold of the human soul, and its extent is reflected in the panic it produces: "*On the day when the sky will be like molten lead, and the mountains like tufts of wool, when no friend will ask about his friend, though they may be within sight of one another. The guilty one will wish he could ransom himself from the suffering on that day by sacrificing his own children, his wife, his brother, the kinsfolk who gave him shelter, and all those on earth, if it could save him.*" (Verses 8–14)

In this *sūrah*, hell itself has a soul, feelings and consciousness of its own. Like living creatures, it plays a part in producing the fright effect: "*It is the raging fire that tears the skin away. It will claim all who turn their backs, and turn away from the truth, amass riches and hoard them.*" (Verses 15–18) Even the punishment and suffering is more psychological than physical: "*the day when they shall come in haste from their graves, as if*

rallying to a flag, with eyes downcast, with ignominy overwhelming them. Such is the day they have been promised." (Verses 43–44)

The images, scenes and impressions in this *sūrah* are different from those of the preceding one because of the difference in their general outlooks, despite the fact that they address the same central theme. The *sūrah* also provides images of human psychology in positive and adverse situations, and in cases of embracing faith or otherwise. This fits perfectly with its special psychological emphasis. It describes man in the following terms: "*Man is born with a restless disposition: when misfortune befalls him, he is fretful; and when good fortune comes his way, he grows tight-fisted. Not so those who pray.*" (Verses 19–22) The *sūrah* goes on to provide a picture of believers and their apparent and inner characteristics. This is in line with the general style of the *sūrah*: "*Not so those who pray, and always attend to their prayers; who give a due share of their possessions to the one who asks [for help] and the one who is deprived; who believe in the Day of Judgement; who stand in fear of their Lord's punishment, for none may feel totally secure from their Lord's punishment; who guard their chastity except with those joined to them in marriage, or those whom they rightfully possess – for then, they are free of all blame, whereas those who seek to go beyond that [limit] are indeed transgressors; who are faithful to their trusts and to their pledges; who stand up for the truth when they bear witness; and who attend to their prayers without fail.*" (Verses 22–34)

The main drift in the preceding *sūrah* was to establish absolute seriousness in the question of faith. Hence the truth of the hereafter was one of several in the *sūrah*, alongside that of meting out swift punishment in this world to those who reject faith, and showing no leniency in the punishment of those who alter the principles of faith. By contrast, the drift in this *sūrah* is to establish the truth of the hereafter and the requital of all, as well as outlining the standards of such requital. This means that the hereafter is the main truth the *sūrah* speaks about. Hence, other truths mentioned here directly relate to the hereafter. An example of this is the difference in the way the *sūrah* mentions God's days and the reckoning of human days, and how God sees the Day of Judgement and how people see it: "*All the angels and the Spirit will ascend to Him, on a day the length of which is fifty thousand years. Therefore, endure all*

adversity with goodly patience. People think it to be far away, but We see it near at hand." (Verses 4–7) Another example is the difference affecting human psychology in the two cases of hardship and comfort when these are combined with faith or unfaith. Both are determinants of the type of requital received on the Day of Judgement. The *sūrah* also speaks of the unbelievers' arrogance as they entertain hopes of being admitted to gardens of bliss when they are of no importance in God's measure. They cannot evade His punishment. Thus we see that the *sūrah* is almost entirely devoted to the truth of the hereafter, which it aims to firmly establish in people's minds.

Another aspect of this *sūrah* is its particular musical rhythm that echoes its line of expression. The varied beat of the preceding *sūrah* responded to the change of the rhyme from one section to another, and the ambience of each. Here, the changes are wider in scope, because they incorporate the varied musical structure of the *sūrah*, not merely its varying rhyme. Here, every musical section is more complex and profound. This is particularly true of its first part where we have three melodies that differ in length and tune, but which share the same final beat. The first takes up verses 1–5, ending with a long '*a*' sound. This is repeated on two further occasions in the two short verses that follow. A second melody takes up three more verses, with the first two having different endings, but the third echoing the long '*a*' sound at the end. A third melody is composed of five verses, maintaining an '*eeh*' ending in the first four, but ending the fifth with another long '*a*'. Then we have six short verses, all ending with a long '*a*', but the rhyme in the first three is different from that of the other three. The remainder of the *sūrah* maintains an '*m*' or '*n*' ending preceded by a long '*e*' or '*o*'. The rhythm in the first section is both complex and profound. A sensitive ear will not fail to appreciate its sophistication, which is unfamiliar to those used to Arabic rhythm. However, the Qur'ānic style makes it easy to appreciate, moulding it in such a way as to overcome its unfamiliarity and so making it perfectly acceptable.

Al-Ma'ārij
(Ways of Ascent)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

An inquirer has asked about a suffering which is bound to befall (1)

the unbelievers. Nothing can ward it off, (2)

as it comes from God, the Lord of the Ways of Ascent. (3)

All the angels and the Spirit will ascend to Him, on a day the length of which is fifty thousand years. (4)

Therefore, endure all adversity with goodly patience. (5)

People think it to be far away, (6)

but We see it near at hand. (7)

On the day when the sky will be like molten lead, (8)

and the mountains like tufts of wool, (9)

وَلَا يَسْـَٔلُ حَمِيمٌ حَمِيمًا ﴿١٠﴾

when no friend will ask about his friend, (10)

يُبَصَّرُونَهُمْ ۚ يَوَدُّ ٱلْمُجْرِمُ لَوْ يَفْتَدِى مِنْ عَذَابِ يَوْمِئِذٍۭ بِبَنِيهِ ﴿١١﴾

though they may be within sight of one another. The guilty one will wish he could ransom himself from the suffering on that day by sacrificing his own children, (11)

وَصَـٰحِبَتِهِۦ وَأَخِيهِ ﴿١٢﴾

his wife, his brother, (12)

وَفَصِيلَتِهِ ٱلَّتِى تُـْٔوِيهِ ﴿١٣﴾

the kinsfolk who gave him shelter, (13)

وَمَن فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ جَمِيعًا ثُمَّ يُنجِيهِ ﴿١٤﴾

and all those on earth, if it could save him. (14)

كَلَّآ ۖ إِنَّهَا لَظَىٰ ﴿١٥﴾

But no! It is the raging fire (15)

نَزَّاعَةً لِّلشَّوَىٰ ﴿١٦﴾

that tears the skin away. (16)

تَدْعُوا۟ مَنْ أَدْبَرَ وَتَوَلَّىٰ ﴿١٧﴾

It will claim all who turn their backs, and turn away from the truth, (17)

وَجَمَعَ فَأَوْعَىٰٓ ﴿١٨﴾

amass riches and hoard them. (18)

إِنَّ ٱلْإِنسَـٰنَ خُلِقَ هَلُوعًا ﴿١٩﴾

Man is born with a restless disposition: (19)

when misfortune befalls him, he is fretful; (20)

إِذَا مَسَّهُ ٱلشَّرُّ جَزُوعًا ﴿٢٠﴾

and when good fortune comes his way, he grows tight-fisted. (21)

وَإِذَا مَسَّهُ ٱلْخَيْرُ مَنُوعًا ﴿٢١﴾

Not so those who pray, (22)

إِلَّا ٱلْمُصَلِّينَ ﴿٢٢﴾

and always attend to their prayers; (23)

ٱلَّذِينَ هُمْ عَلَىٰ صَلَاتِهِمْ دَآئِمُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

who give a due share of their possessions (24)

وَٱلَّذِينَ فِىٓ أَمْوَٰلِهِمْ حَقٌّ مَّعْلُومٌ ﴿٢٤﴾

to the one who asks [for help] and the one who is deprived; (25)

لِّلسَّآئِلِ وَٱلْمَحْرُومِ ﴿٢٥﴾

who believe in the Day of Judgement; (26)

وَٱلَّذِينَ يُصَدِّقُونَ بِيَوْمِ ٱلدِّينِ ﴿٢٦﴾

who stand in fear of their Lord's punishment, (27)

وَٱلَّذِينَ هُم مِّنْ عَذَابِ رَبِّهِم مُّشْفِقُونَ ﴿٢٧﴾

for none may feel totally secure from their Lord's punishment; (28)

إِنَّ عَذَابَ رَبِّهِمْ غَيْرُ مَأْمُونٍ ﴿٢٨﴾

who guard their chastity (29)

وَٱلَّذِينَ هُمْ لِفُرُوجِهِمْ حَٰفِظُونَ ﴿٢٩﴾

except with those joined to them in marriage, or those whom they rightfully possess – for then, they are free of all blame, (30)

إِلَّا عَلَىٰٓ أَزْوَٰجِهِمْ أَوْ مَا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَٰنُهُمْ فَإِنَّهُمْ غَيْرُ مَلُومِينَ ﴿٣٠﴾

whereas those who seek to go beyond that [limit] are indeed transgressors; (31)

فَمَنِ ٱبْتَغَىٰ وَرَآءَ ذَٰلِكَ فَأُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلْعَادُونَ ﴿٣١﴾

who are faithful to their trusts and to their pledges; (32)

وَٱلَّذِينَ هُمْ لِأَمَٰنَٰتِهِمْ وَعَهْدِهِمْ رَٰعُونَ ﴿٣٢﴾

who stand up for the truth when they bear witness; (33)

وَٱلَّذِينَ هُم بِشَهَٰدَٰتِهِمْ قَآئِمُونَ ﴿٣٣﴾

and who attend to their prayers without fail. (34)

وَٱلَّذِينَ هُمْ عَلَىٰ صَلَاتِهِمْ يُحَافِظُونَ ﴿٣٤﴾

They are the ones to be honoured in the gardens of paradise. (35)

أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ فِى جَنَّٰتٍ مُّكْرَمُونَ ﴿٣٥﴾

What is wrong with the unbelievers, that they run confusedly before you, (36)

فَمَالِ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ قِبَلَكَ مُهْطِعِينَ ﴿٣٦﴾

from the right and the left, in crowds? (37)

عَنِ ٱلْيَمِينِ وَعَنِ ٱلشِّمَالِ عِزِينَ ﴿٣٧﴾

Does every one of them hope to enter a garden of bliss? (38)

أَيَطْمَعُ كُلُّ ٱمْرِئٍ مِّنْهُمْ أَن يُدْخَلَ جَنَّةَ نَعِيمٍ ﴿٣٨﴾

No! We have created them from the substance they know. (39)

كَلَّآ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَٰهُم مِّمَّا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٣٩﴾

By the Lord of all star risings and settings, We certainly have the power (40)

فَلَآ أُقْسِمُ بِرَبِّ ٱلْمَشَٰرِقِ وَٱلْمَغَٰرِبِ إِنَّا لَقَٰدِرُونَ ﴿٤٠﴾

to replace them with better people. There is nothing to prevent Us from doing so. (41)

عَلَىٰٓ أَن نُّبَدِّلَ خَيْرًا مِّنْهُمْ وَمَا نَحْنُ بِمَسْبُوقِينَ ﴿٤١﴾

Leave them to indulge in idle talk and play until they face the day they have been promised, (42)

فَذَرْهُمْ يَخُوضُوا۟ وَيَلْعَبُوا۟ حَتَّىٰ يُلَٰقُوا۟ يَوْمَهُمُ ٱلَّذِى يُوعَدُونَ ﴿٤٢﴾

the day when they shall come in haste from their graves, as if rallying to a flag, (43)

يَوْمَ يَخْرُجُونَ مِنَ ٱلْأَجْدَاثِ سِرَاعًا كَأَنَّهُمْ إِلَىٰ نُصُبٍ يُوفِضُونَ ﴿٤٣﴾

with eyes downcast, with ignominy overwhelming them. Such is the day they have been promised. (44)

خَٰشِعَةً أَبْصَٰرُهُمْ تَرْهَقُهُمْ ذِلَّةٌ ذَٰلِكَ ٱلْيَوْمُ ٱلَّذِى كَانُوا۟ يُوعَدُونَ ﴿٤٤﴾

The Truth of the Hereafter

> *An inquirer has asked about a suffering which is bound to befall the unbelievers. Nothing can ward it off, as it comes from God, the Lord of the Ways of Ascent.* (Verses 1–3)

The very concept of the hereafter was very difficult for the Arab polytheists to understand. They strongly resisted it. In fact they received it with so much amazement that they denied it outright. They further challenged the Prophet, in various ways, to bring it about or to define its timing. A report attributed to Ibn 'Abbās mentions that the man who asked the question quoted in the first verse of the *sūrah* was al-Naḍr ibn al-Ḥārith. Another report quotes him as saying that the reference is to "the unbelievers' question about God's punishment, which is certain to engulf them."

Regardless of who the specific individual was the *sūrah* reports that someone asked about this punishment, indeed, sought to hasten it, and further confirms that it is inevitable because it has been determined by God and that it will soon come. It states that no one can prevent its happening or ward it off. Therefore, to question or hasten it is ill-advised. Moreover, this punishment is to befall the unbelievers, in total, which means that those who question it are included like every other unbeliever. It is administered by God, '*the Lord of the Ways of Ascent*'. This is an expression of highness, which is one of God's attributes mentioned in different ways in the Qur'ān, such as: "*High above all orders [of being] is He, the Lord of the Throne.*" (40: 15)

Having absolutely confirmed the inevitability of such punishment, the *sūrah* describes the day when it will take place, affirming that it will soon arrive. However, God's measure is different from mankind's:

> *All the angels and the Spirit will ascend to Him, on a day the length of which is fifty thousand years. Therefore, endure all adversity with goodly patience. People think it to be far away, but We see it near at hand.* (Verses 4–7)

Most probably the day to which these verses refer is the Day of Resurrection, as the *sūrah* almost defines it as so. On that day, the angels and the Spirit will ascend to God. The Spirit refers, in all probability, to the Angel Gabriel, since he is given this name elsewhere in the Qur'ān. He is specifically mentioned here, after the reference to all angels, because of his special status. Likewise, the angels' ascension on that day is highlighted so as to give it special importance; they will do so to fulfil what is assigned to them on that day. We do not know, nor are we required to know, the nature of their assignments, or how the angels ascend, or to where. All these are details that belong to the realm beyond the reach of our perception. To know them does not add to the statement's import. We have nothing to point to such information. Therefore, we do not attempt any further explanation. It is enough for us to reflect on the image to appreciate the great importance of that day when the angels and the Spirit are busy conducting their assigned tasks.

The statement that the length of that day is *fifty thousand years* may be an expression of very long duration as is customary in Arabic idiom, or it may express a true fact meaning that the day in question is equal to fifty thousand of our years despite its being just a single day. We can easily imagine this considering that our earth days represent the length of time the earth takes to revolve once in position. There are stars, however, which take thousands of our days to revolve once. This is not to say that this is what is meant here; we only state this to make it clear that the length of days can differ greatly.

If one of God's days is equal to fifty thousand of our years, then the punishment of the Day of Judgement is certainly close, according to God's measure, even though people may think it far away. Therefore, God tells His Messenger to be patient with them: "*People think it to be far away, but We see it near at hand.*" (Verses 6–7) The order to remain patient is part of the divine message's essence; it is required of every messenger and every believer. This is fundamentally necessary because the burden is heavy and the task hard. It is vitally important to keep the believers united and content, looking to their ultimate goal.

Goodly or 'beautiful' patience, to use a literal translation of the Qur'ānic term, is that type of patience coupled with a feeling of contentment and reassurance. It is undisturbed by displeasure, worry or doubt in the true promise. It is the type of patience shown by one who is certain of the outcome, content with God's will, appreciating His wisdom in the trying times he goes through, looking to Him in all situations. It is this type of goodly patience that is worthy of one who advocates the divine message. It is after all God's message calling on people to believe in Him. Its advocates have no personal interest in it; they seek no gain out of it. Whatever they suffer as a result is for God's sake, and whatever happens to it is by His will. Goodly patience, therefore, is the only attitude that fits properly with this truth.

God, who has bestowed this message from on high and has made this promise which the unbelievers hasten, determines events and their timings as He pleases, according to His overall plan for the universe. Human beings remain unaware of His will and plan; therefore, they hasten things. When time goes by without fulfilment of the promise, they begin to doubt. Worry may also be experienced by advocates of

the divine message themselves. They too may entertain thoughts and desires that the promise be fulfilled soon. Therefore, they are given the following instruction so that they may remain firm: "*Therefore, endure all adversity with goodly patience.*" (Verse 5) The address here is delivered to the Prophet so as to give him reassurance in the face of the opposition and rejection he faced. It also adds another truth here, highlighting the fact that God sees matters in a different way. He does not measure things by means of our small measures: "*People think it to be far away, but We see it near at hand.*" (Verses 6–7)

Celestial Events

> *On the day when the sky will be like molten lead, and the mountains like tufts of wool.* (Verses 8–9)

The Qur'ān mentions in several places that great celestial events will take place on that promised day, and as a result change will affect different celestial bodies in their positions and characteristics, as well as their inter-relations. One of these events changes the sky making it like molten lead, or molten metals generally as signified by the Arabic word used here, *al-muhl.* These statements should be reflected upon by physicists and astronomers. They suggest that most probably celestial bodies are composed of metals that have melted and taken gas form, which is a stage far beyond that of melting by excessive heat. It is possible that they will lose their heat on the Day of Judgement and cool down to a fluid stage, changing their present status. Elsewhere in the Qur'ān we have the following statement as a mark of the Day of Judgement: "*When the stars fall and disperse.*" (81: 2)

At any rate, this is only one possible explanation, which may or may not be worth further study by scientific researchers. As for us, we read the text and look at the awesome image painted, with the sky becoming like molten metal and the mountains like tufts of wool. We also contemplate what is beyond this image of frightening events that leave their marks on people in an unusual way which the Qur'ān accurately describes:

> *On the day when the sky will be like molten lead, and the mountains like tufts of wool, when no friend will ask about his friend, though*

> *they may be within sight of one another. The guilty one will wish he could ransom himself from the suffering on that day by sacrificing his own children, his wife, his brother, the kinsfolk who gave him shelter, and all those on earth, if it could save him.* (Verses 8–14)

People will be totally preoccupied in a way that does not allow anyone to look at anything other than his own situation. No thought will they give to anyone but themselves: "*When no friend will ask about his friend.*" The frightening event severs all bonds, locking everyone within their own problems. Yet they are made to see one another: "*though they may be within sight of one another,*" as if deliberately brought so. However, each will be totally absorbed with their own impending fate so that none will even think of enquiring about a friend or even asking a friend for help.

What about the guilty one? The terror he feels is so overwhelming that he wishes he could offer anything as a ransom so as to be spared the punishment awaiting him. He is ready to sacrifice his nearest and dearest, the very ones whom he so cared for that he would render any sacrifice for their sake. He is willing to sacrifice his own children, wife, brothers and all his kinsfolk who used to afford him shelter and protection. Indeed his eagerness to escape the approaching torment is so strong that he loses all feeling for anyone else. Indeed he would sacrifice everyone on earth if only he could be spared. What a frightening image of distress and panic!

In the midst of this situation, the guilty hears something that closes the door to any fleeting hope. Indeed, all will listen to what makes the situation abundantly clear:

> *But no! It is the raging fire that tears the skin away. It will claim all who turn their backs, and turn away from the truth, amass riches and hoard them.* (Verses 15–18)

There is absolutely no place for such impossible notions of escape, even though one would offer one's children, spouse, brothers, kinsfolk and everyone else in ransom. "*But no! It is the raging fire.*" (Verse 15) It rages on ready to burn, but it also "*tears the skin away.*" (Verse 16) It tears

the skin off both the face and head. Here, the fire is described as if it has a will of its own, deliberately taking part in inflicting punishment on the guilty. "*It will claim all who turn their backs, and turn away from the truth.*" (Verse 17) Those people who turned away when they were called upon to follow the truth embodied in the divine message are now called again. This time the caller is the raging fire, and this time they cannot turn away. In the past, they were busy amassing riches and hoarding them. Now their attentions cannot be diverted from responding to this call by the raging fire. Nor can they divert it from themselves, no matter what they offer in ransom.

Special emphasis is placed in this *sūrah*, as in the previous two *sūrahs*, on hindering good actions, discouraging the feeding of the needy and hoarding amassed riches. All these are placed side by side with disbelief and denying the divine message. Such repeated emphasis suggests that there were in that early period in Makkah people who combined greed and stinginess with disbelief and rejection. Everyone is warned against this and told of its consequences as a primary cause of punishment, second to disbelief in God and associating partners with Him.

The *sūrah* includes other references confirming this and showing some features of the prevailing environment Islam faced in Makkah. The whole social set up concentrated on amassing wealth through trade and usury. The Quraysh elders were the ones so engaged in such trade. They used to organize trade caravans in winter and summer. Their preoccupation with wealth meant that many were poor and deprived. Hence, the need for such repeated reminders and warnings. The Qur'ān continued to address these social ills, fighting greed and stinginess within people's souls, both before and after the conquest of Makkah. Anyone who follows the Qur'ānic verses addressing such social ills will appreciate this. These verses give clear warnings against usury, the wrongful taking of other people's money, devouring the wealth of orphans when they are still young, the oppression of orphan girls and forcibly marrying them to obtain their money, the ill-treatment of beggars, orphans and the needy generally. In all this, the Qur'ān launches a strong campaign against unfair practices, giving us at the same time a fair idea of the prevailing social environment. Moreover, these verses provide directives on how to rid the human soul, in all situations, of its gripping obsession with amassing wealth.

Between Good and Evil

The *sūrah* now depicts how man faces good and evil, in both situations of faith and unfaith. It also outlines the qualities of the believers and states their ultimate end in contrast to the fate of those who are guilty:

> *Man is born with a restless disposition: when misfortune befalls him, he is fretful; and when good fortune comes his way, he grows tight-fisted. Not so those who pray, and always attend to their prayers; who give a due share of their possessions to the one who asks [for help] and the one who is deprived; who believe in the Day of Judgement; who stand in fear of their Lord's punishment, for none may feel totally secure from their Lord's punishment; who guard their chastity except with those joined to them in marriage, or those whom they rightfully possess – for then, they are free of all blame, whereas those who seek to go beyond that [limit] are indeed transgressors; who are faithful to their trusts and to their pledges; who stand up for the truth when they bear witness; and who attend to their prayers without fail. They are the ones to be honoured in the gardens of paradise.* (Verses 19–35)

The picture the Qur'ān draws of a man devoid of faith is remarkably accurate and expressive. Only faith can elevate him above such qualities. It is faith that gives him the bond of reassurance so that he does not panic when confronted with evil and is not stingy when his fortunes turn good: "*Man is born with a restless disposition: when misfortune befalls him, he is fretful; and when good fortune comes his way, he grows tight-fisted.*" (Verses 19–21)

Like the brushstrokes of a talented painter, every word in these verses draws a line delineating a human feature. Yet we have here only three very short verses, and these composed of only a small number of words. However, by the time they are finished, the picture drawn comes alive and man, with his distinctive and permanent features, is revealed. He has a restless disposition. He is fretful, feeling the pain of misfortune when it occurs. He panics, lest this should be permanent. He thinks the present moment will last forever. His worry soon imprisons him behind

the bars of the present moment and its misfortune so that he despairs of any change. Fear and worry tear him apart. How can he be otherwise when he does not have the steadying influence of faith and the hope it generates? When his fortunes turn good, he is stingy. He thinks that what he receives has been hard earned by his own efforts. Hence, he does not want others to take anything of it. He wants it all for himself. He becomes the prisoner of his own wealth. The truth is that he does not understand his actual role in getting whatever he earns. He does not look to receive from God what is better than all he has. How can he when his heart is devoid of faith? Thus, he is restless and worried in both situations. This is a very miserable picture of man when faith has no place in his heart.

Thus we see that faith is a very serious issue in man's life. It is not merely a word we utter, or worship rituals we offer. It is a state of mind and a code of living based on a complete value system with which to judge events and situations. Should a person lack such a steadying influence, he is likely to sway with the trend; he is in a permanent state of worry whatever fortune befalls him. By contrast, when his heart is enlightened by faith, he is content and reassured because he feels his bond with the One who conducts events and changes situations. He trusts to His will, feels His mercy, accepts His test, always looks to the relief of his hardship, ready to do good and be charitable knowing that whatever he gives away comes from Him, and whatever is spent for His sake will be rewarded both in this life and in the life to come. Faith is indeed a real gain, which believers receive in this present life before they are rewarded for it in the life to come. This gain is reflected in their state of comfort and reassurance throughout their life on earth.

The Exceptions

The *sūrah* now gives a detailed account of the believers who do not share the common human feature of restlessness and worry. "*Not so those who pray, and always attend to their prayers.*" (Verses 22–23) It is true that prayer is an essential Islamic duty providing the mark of faith. Yet it is much more than this: it is rather the means of contact with God Almighty and the sign of true servitude to Him. In prayer, the relative

positions of God and servant are clearly and specifically outlined. The *sūrah* adds here that believers attend to their prayers all the time and in all situations. It thus gives an image of permanence and stability. Their prayer is disrupted through negligence or laziness. It is a permanent bond. When the Prophet performed voluntary worship, he used to do so regularly. He also said: "The actions that please God most are the ones offered regularly, even though they may be small." [Related in all six anthologies of authentic *aḥādīth*.]

"*Who give a due share of their possessions to the one who asks [for help] and the one who is deprived.*" (Verses 24–25) This due share is *zakāt* in particular and other charitable donations of specified amounts. These are due, by right, from all believers. Perhaps this statement has a broader meaning too, signifying that believers assign a share of their wealth considering it to be due for such needy people. To do so is to rid oneself of stinginess and to rise above the desire to amass wealth. It also implies a recognition by the one who is well off within the community of believers of his duty towards the one who is deprived. When a believer accepts that the needy and the deprived have a rightful claim to a portion of his wealth, he acknowledges the grace God has bestowed on him and the bond he has with fellow human beings. It signifies freedom from greed and stinginess. Moreover, it guarantees mutual cooperation and care within the Muslim community. Thus, *zakāt* appears a duty with far-reaching significance on several levels, within oneself and in the life of the community.

"*Who believe in the Day of Judgement.*" (Verse 26) Drawing an essential but general outline of a believer's character, this quality is directly related to the *sūrah*'s main theme. To believe in the Day of Judgement is half of faith, having as it does a marked influence on one's life, with respect to both emotions and actions. The standard by which a believer in the Day of Judgement weighs up things, events, actions and life altogether is different from that of one who does not believe. Such a believer approaches matters and takes action looking up to heaven and thinking of the hereafter. He treats all events, good or bad, as preludes, while the results come later, in the life to come. Therefore, he looks at these with their expected results and evaluates

them on that basis. By contrast, the one who does not believe in the Day of Judgement looks at everything in the light of what he stands to gain from it in this present, short and limited life. Whatever action he takes is considered within the scope of life on earth. Hence, he weighs things, events and actions differently, arriving at very different conclusions. He is always worried and miserable because what he goes through in this his first life may not be reassuring, comfortable, fair or reasonable unless he adds to it what happens in the next stage, which is longer and broader. Hence, the one who does not take the hereafter into account will be unhappy or will cause unhappiness to those who are close to him. He cannot conceive of a higher level of life bringing him its clear rewards. Hence, believing in the Day of Judgement is half of faith, and it is on this belief that the Islamic code of living is based.

"*Who stand in fear of their Lord's punishment, for none may feel totally secure from their Lord's punishment.*" (Verses 27–28) This takes us a step further than the mere belief in the Day of Judgement. It adds clear sensitivity and alertness, as well as a feeling that despite one's worship one is falling short in the fulfilment of one's duty towards God. One fears to slip at any time and, as a result, deserve punishment. Therefore, one looks for God's help and protection. In his position as a Messenger of God, the Prophet was always on the alert, and in fear of God's punishment. He was convinced that his actions would not ensure his admittance into heaven unless God bestowed His grace on him. He said to his Companions in this respect: 'No one's actions will be enough to ensure their admittance into heaven.' They asked: 'Not even you, Messenger of God?' He said: 'Not even me, unless God bestows His grace on me.' [Related by al-Bukhārī, Muslim and al-Nasā'ī.]

"*None may feel totally secure from their Lord's punishment.*" (Verse 28) This statement suggests permanent awareness of God's punishment, because what incurs such punishment may occur at any moment. God does not require anything more than such awareness from people. Should they slip or succumb to weaknesses, His forgiveness and mercy are always available, and the door to repentance is always open. This is the middle course Islam charts between a total lack of awareness on the

one hand and excessive worry on the other. A believer's heart counters worry with hope, reassured of God's grace in all situations.

"*Who guard their chastity except with those joined to them in marriage, or those whom they rightfully possess – for then, they are free of all blame, whereas those who seek to go beyond that [limit] are indeed transgressors.*" (Verses 29–31) This ensures purity for oneself and the community. Islam builds a community based on purity but with a clear and open approach. It ensures that all important functions are fulfilled and all natural desires are met but without chaos or perversion. A legitimate family, living openly in its home is the unit of Islamic society where every child knows his father and none is ashamed of its birth. In this way, sexual relations are based on a proper, clean, legitimate and long-lasting bond with clear objectives. They seek to fulfil human and social duties other than the satisfaction of a mere physical urge. Hence, the Qur'ān states this quality of believers here, making it clear that sex is permitted only with spouses or with women who are rightfully possessed.

A word needs to be said here concerning this second category, which refers to slave women, if they happen to lawfully exist in a Muslim society. The only lawful reason for their existence is their having been taken prisoner during a war fought for God's cause, which is the only legitimate war from an Islamic point of view. Islam lays down a ruling concerning prisoners of war, which is outlined in a verse of *Sūrah* 47, Muḥammad: "*Now when you meet the unbelievers in battle, smite their necks. Then when you have thoroughly subdued them, bind them firmly. Thereafter, set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom, until war shall lay down its burden.*" (47: 4) Thus, the final ruling on prisoners of war is to set them free, either by an act of grace or against ransom. However, in some situations there may remain prisoners of war who are not set free. When such women slaves exist, sexual relations with them is permitted but only with their master. All the while, however, different ways of regaining their freedom are available to them. In fact, Islam provides many ways to ensure that slavery is abolished altogether. In all this, Islam is open, ensuring clean sexual relations in society. It does not leave such women prisoners of war to be the victims of

rape and filthy and exploitative relations, as often happens elsewhere in war situations. Nor does it put a false tag on the situation, calling such women free when they are in fact slaves.

"*Those who seek to go beyond that [limit] are indeed transgressors.*" (Verse 31) Thus Islam closes the door on all dirty sexual relations, keeping only these two open forms as legitimate. According to Islam, sex is a legitimate and clean function to which dirt may attach when it is practised in an illegitimate or deviant way.[1]

"*Who are faithful to their trusts and to their pledges.*" (Verse 32) This is one of the basic moral qualities on which Islamic society is founded. The honouring of trust and pledges begins, according to Islam, with honouring the great trust that God offered to the heavens, the earth and the mountains but they refused to accept it, fearing that they would not be able to fulfil its commitments. Man however accepted it. This is the trust of faith and the fulfilment of its requirements out of choice but without compulsion. It also involves honouring the first pledge taken from man's nature, before birth, when this nature testifies to the truth of God's oneness. Faithfulness to all trusts and pledges in worldly transactions is founded on honouring this first trust and this first pledge. Islam repeatedly emphasizes the importance of such faithfulness, to trust, confirming its role in building its society on solid foundations. It considers such faithfulness a distinctive feature of a believer, whereas the opposite quality distinguishes unbelievers. This is often repeated in the Qur'ān and the *Sunnah*, leaving no room for doubt as to the importance Islam attaches to faithfulness.

"*Who stand up for the truth when they bear witness.*" (Verse 33) To bear witness and give testimony is, according to Islam, the basis of the fulfilment of many rights. Indeed, preventing any transgression of the bounds set by God can only be ensured on such a basis. Hence, God has rightly placed strong emphasis on bearing witness, without hesitation, and testifying when a dispute needs to be adjudged. When bearing witness, the truth must be stated without distortion or twisting. Indeed, God has

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1. For further treatment please refer to comments on *Sūrah* 23, in Volume XII, pp. 193–195, and on *Sūrah* 47, in Volume XV, pp. 393–401

made bearing witness an act done for Him so as to link it to obedience of Him. He gives us the instruction: "*Bear witness before God.*" (65: 2) Here, it is made a feature of believers. It is indeed one of the trusts that need to be fulfilled. It is given special mention in order to further emphasize its importance.

This list of believers' qualities started with attendance to prayers, and it now concludes with that same quality: "*And who attend to their prayers without fail.*" (Verse 34) The earlier reference to prayer mentioned that it is always attended to. Now, the point at issue is that it is done '*without fail*'. The two points are not the same. Here, the emphasis is on offering prayers on time, performing the obligatory part and adding the voluntary one, adhering to its form and spirit. Believers are neither negligent of this, nor are they careless. Needless to say, mentioning prayer as the first and the last of believers' distinctive qualities confirms the importance attached to it.

At this point, the fate of this group is stated: "*They are the ones to be honoured in the gardens of paradise.*" (Verse 35) This short verse combines an aspect of material enjoyment with a spiritual one. They are in gardens of paradise, but they are also honoured there. Thus, when they enjoy what is provided for them in paradise, they also enjoy being honoured for maintaining heir high moral standard.

The Unbelievers' Attitude

The *sūrah* then depicts a Makkan scene in which we see the unbelievers going hurriedly to where the Prophet was reading the Qur'ān. Once there, they would split into groups around him. The *sūrah* criticizes their hurrying and grouping when they had no intention of listening to or of heeding his advice:

> *What is wrong with the unbelievers, that they run confusedly before you, from the right and the left, in crowds?* (Verses 36–37)

There is implied sarcasm in the question. It describes their confused movement, with the Arabic expression adding a connotation of their

being led. The question wonders at their confusion: they move hurriedly, but without any intention of receiving guidance. They only want to learn what the Prophet says before splitting into small groups discussing how to resist what they have heard. What is wrong with them, then? "*Does every one of them hope to enter a garden of bliss?*" (Verse 38) How can they entertain such hopes when their behaviour leads only to hell, and not to heaven and its gardens of bliss? Do they think that they have a high position with God to ensure that they will enter heaven despite the fact that they disbelieve in Him, oppose the Prophet, scheme against Islam? They must imagine that they command very high value with God to achieve such elevation.

The answer is swift and decisive: "*No!*" It is delivered in the negative, implying contempt. "*We have created them from the substance they know.*" (Verse 39) They are aware that they have been created from a humble fluid they know well enough. There is an implicit, yet profound touch here, destroying all their pride and arrogance without using a single objectionable word. Yet the verse is so expressed that it depicts a state of utter humiliation and ignominy. How can they hope to be in heaven when they disbelieve and commit evil deeds, knowing from what substance they are created? In God's measure, they are too lowly to hold favour with Him. Why would He waive His law of administering justice to all according to their deeds just for them?

Confirming their unimportance and lowly status, the *sūrah* states that God is able to replace them with better creatures. Furthermore, they cannot escape the punishment their actions deserve:

> *By the Lord of all star risings and settings, We certainly have the power to replace them with better people. There is nothing to prevent Us from doing so.* (Verses 40–41)

The point at issue needs no oath, but the mention of risings and settings reflects God's greatness. These movements may refer to the rise risings and settings of the millions upon millions of stars in the universe. On the other hand, this may be a reference to sunrise and sunset over every point on our planet. At every moment, there is a

sunrise and a sunset, as the earth continues to revolve. Whichever the meaning intended, the mention of these risings and settings gives us a feeling of the greatness of the universe and the Almightiness of God who created the universe. Do those people, created from humble fluid, need an oath by the Lord of all star risings and settings to realize that He is able to create better people? Do they need an oath confirming that they cannot escape from Him?

The *sūrah* concludes with an address to the Prophet telling him to leave them to face their fate on that promised day. It shows their status then when they utterly distressed:

> *Leave them to indulge in idle talk and play until they face the day they have been promised, the day when they shall come in haste from their graves, as if rallying to a flag, with eyes downcast, with ignominy overwhelming them. Such is the day they have been promised.* (Verses 42–44)

This address implies a definite warning that should fill them with worry and anticipation. Indeed, the image describing them and their movements on that day should add intense fear. Moreover, it carries a clear element of sarcasm to parallel their pride and conceit. We see them coming out of their graves, hurrying on like people rallying to a flag or to a statue they worship. This is consistent with what they do in this life when they rally to flags and statues on festive days. Now they do the same, but there is no festivity on that day. Their description is completed by the statement, '*with ignominy overwhelming them.*' We can almost see their faces clearly through these words. We see them humiliated, overwhelmed by ignominy. They used to play and indulge in idle talk, but now they are exhausted, broken: "*Such is the day they have been promised.*" (Verse 44) That is the day they doubted would ever happen. Yet in their denial, they tried to hasten its arrival.

Thus the *sūrah* ends, with perfect harmony between its opening and end. It represents an episode in the long discussion of the major issue of resurrection, reckoning and requital, setting the Islamic concept of life in contrast with un-Islamic concepts.

SŪRAH 71

Nūḥ
(Noah)

Prologue

This *sūrah*, devoted to the story of Noah and his people, describes an important experience of advocacy of the divine message on earth. It represents a cycle in the consistent and permanent treatment of mankind, and of the ever-raging battle between good and evil, guidance and error, truth and falsehood. This episode depicts a humanity that is stubborn, hard, established in its ways, toeing the line drawn by arrogant leadership, unwilling to consider the guidance provided or to look at the pointers to faith. These are available everywhere in the universe and within people's own selves, recorded in the open book of the universe and in man's inner soul. At the same time, the *sūrah* shows an aspect of divine mercy represented in the fact that God sent messengers to rescue mankind from their stubborn rejection of guidance, and their blind following of arrogant and erroneous leadership.

The *sūrah* also paints a picture of the tireless efforts of God's messengers to provide erring humanity with guidance. They showed unparalleled patience despite all the adversity they had to contend with and when they had no personal interest in the matter: they did not expect any reward from those who benefited by their guidance, nor did they hope for any personal favour from those who attained faith as a result of their

efforts. They received nothing like the fees charged by universities and educational institutes for the services they provide.

In this *sūrah,* Noah presents to God the final outcome of the 950 years he spent exerting such tireless efforts in advocating the divine faith among his people. Essentially, they had continued to arrogantly and stubbornly follow their leaders who, in turn, possessed wealth and power. His report, as outlined in the *sūrah* states: "*My Lord! I have been pleading with my people night and day, but the more I call them, the further they run away. Whenever I call on them, so that You may forgive them, they thrust their fingers into their ears, draw their garments over their heads, grow obstinate and become even more arrogant and insolent. I have called them openly; I have preached to them in public, and I spoke to them secretly, in private. I said: "Ask your Lord for forgiveness: He is ever forgiving. He will let loose the sky over you with abundance, and will give you wealth and children; and will provide you with gardens and rivers. What is the matter with you? Why do you behave with such insolence towards your Lord, when it is He who has created you in successive stages? Do you not see how God has created seven heavens in layers, placing in them the moon for a light and the sun for a lantern? God has made you spring from the earth like a plant, and He will return you into it and then bring you out again. God has made the earth a vast expanse for you, so that you may walk along its spacious paths.*" (Verses 5–20) Having thus outlined the efforts he made and the varied methods he employed in advocating the divine message among his people, Noah says: "*My Lord! They have disobeyed me and followed those whose wealth and children lead them increasingly into ruin. They have devised a mighty plot, and said to each other: "Do not ever renounce your gods! Do not abandon Wadd, Suwā', Yaghūth, Ya'ūq or Nasr. They have led many astray.*" (Verses 21–24)

The result is very negative. Yet a messenger's task remains the same: to advocate God's message.

This extremely difficult experience is shown to the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him), who inherited the trust of advocating the divine message throughout the earth until the end of time and who shouldered the heaviest burden assigned to any prophet. He is shown how a former brother of his sought to establish the truth of faith on earth. He is, thus, able to see just how stubborn man can be in resisting the message

of truth, and how corrupt deviant leadership can be and how it can overpower guided leadership. He learns of God's will to send messenger after messenger to provide mankind with guidance, and this despite all the stubborn and continuous rejection from as early as the days of Noah (peace be upon him).

This experience is shown to the Muslim community in Makkah, and to the Muslim community generally, because it is the heir to God's message to mankind. It is charged with implementing the code of life based on the divine message, even in the midst of the *jāhiliyyah* prevalent at the time, and in the midst of every subsequent *jāhiliyyah*. The Muslim community thus sees the picture of firm resolve represented by Noah, the second father of mankind, who struggled over such a long period of time, to present God's message. It sees the care God took of the small number of believers who accepted Noah's message and who were saved from the total destruction that engulfed their unbelieving fellows.

Noah's experience is also presented to the Makkan unbelievers, showing them the fate suffered by their unbelieving predecessors. They may thus realize that God has bestowed a great favour on them, sending them a kind Messenger who cares greatly for them. This Messenger does not appeal to God to destroy them as Noah did. It is God's grace that has determined that they will be given respite. Noah prayed to God to take away all unbelievers after he had exhausted all means, efforts and methods in calling on them to follow divine guidance. It was only at that juncture that he made his heartfelt appeal: "*And Noah said: 'Lord! Do not leave a single unbeliever on earth. If you spare them, they will lead Your servants astray and beget none but sinners and hardened unbelievers.*" (Verses 26–27)

In presenting this episode in the advocacy of God's message, the *sūrah* clearly shows the unity of the divine faith and its firm, unchanging roots, as well as its close link with the universe, God's will and life's events as they take place according to what God has determined. We see all this through what Noah says to his people by way of warning and instruction: "*He said: 'My people, I am here to warn you plainly. Worship God alone and fear Him, and obey me. He will forgive you your sins and grant you respite for an appointed term. When God's appointed*

term comes, it can never be put back, if you but knew it." (Verses 2–4) We also see it as the *sūrah* quotes Noah saying to his people: "*What is the matter with you? Why do you behave with such insolence towards your Lord, when it is He who has created you in successive stages? Do you not see how God has created seven heavens in layers, placing in them the moon for a light and the sun for a lantern? God has made you spring from the earth like a plant, and He will return you into it and then bring you out again. God has made the earth a vast expanse for you, so that you may walk along its spacious paths.*" (Verses 13–20)

Establishing this truth about the unity of God's message in the hearts of the Muslim community is particularly important. It helps Muslims to understand the truth of their message and that they descend from a long line of believers starting from the very early days of humanity. It also tells them of their role in advocating this message, which embodies the code God has laid down for human life.

Why the Effort?

When we look at the great efforts exerted by God's messengers (peace be upon them all) in presenting guidance to a stubbornly erroneous humanity, and consider that it has been God's will to send them, one after another, for this purpose, we should be nothing less than overwhelmed.

One may well ask whether the results have justified such long efforts and noble sacrifices, from Noah's early time through to Muḥammad's own time, as well as the intervening and subsequent efforts and sacrifices made by believers in God's message. Nonetheless such efforts and sacrifices have continuously been made and this in the face of ridicule and abuse. Indeed some messengers faced burning in the fire or were cut in halves with a saw, or had to flee their homeland and abandon their families. When the final message was given, the Prophet Muḥammad and those who followed him made strenuous efforts to establish it. Further efforts and sacrifices have been made by believers ever since. The question is, then whether the results justify such efforts and sacrifices? Should this struggle be maintained? Does humanity deserve such divine care? Does this insignificant creature called man, so arrogant and stubborn

that he still resists the truth, deserve such care from God manifested in sending messenger after messenger?

The answer based on much thought and reflection is unarguably 'Yes, indeed.' To establish the truth of faith on earth merits all these efforts, struggles and sacrifices made by God's messengers and their followers throughout every generation. Perhaps the establishment of this truth is greater than man's existence, and greater than the earth and all who live on it. It is indeed greater than the universe in which the earth is no more than a little, hardly visible particle.

God has willed to create man with special qualities that make the establishment of this truth in his conscience and way of life dependent on his own human effort, with God's help and guidance. We do not know why God created man such, why He let his acquisition of faith be dependent on his own efforts, or why He made him neither a naturally obedient believer like the angels nor a completely evil, disobedient creature like Satan. We believe, however, that creating man with such a nature and qualities serves a divine purpose related to the creation of the universe and its operative system.

This means that human efforts are needed to establish the truth of faith in man's world. God has chosen some of the best of His servants to make such efforts. These are the prophets and the messengers, as well as select groups of true followers. These are the ones assigned the task of establishing this truth on earth; it deserves such strenuous efforts and great sacrifices. When this truth is firmly rooted in a human heart, then that heart enjoys a ray of God's light. It harbours one of His secrets and becomes a means for the fulfilment of His will, a will that will inevitably be done. All this is fact, not just a figure of speech. It is a truth that is greater than man and his world, and even the whole universe.

Moreover, the establishment of this truth in the life of humanity, or a section of it, provides a link between this earthly life of ours and eternal life. Thus, human life is elevated to maintain the link between what ends in death and what is eternal, between the part and the whole, between the defective and the absolutely perfect. Such a result is greater than all efforts and sacrifices, even though it may last for a day or part of one day during human life on earth. When this truth is thus established, it

provides all generations of humanity with a lantern of true light. This lantern then takes practical form which it will strive to maintain.

History has repeatedly shown that humanity only attained the heights it is able to reach when the truth of God was established. No other means enabled mankind to reach such summits. Those periods in history when truth was so established, and its advocates were in leadership, were indeed the highest summits reached in human life. This was greater than man's ultimate dreams, yet it was a living reality. It is simply not possible for humanity to rise with the help of any philosophy, science, art, creed or system to the level it attained and can always attain through the establishment of faith in people's hearts, lives, morality, values and standards. This truth of faith provides the basis of a complete way of life, whether it is given in a general form as in the early messages, or in a very detailed one as is the case in its final version.

When humanity lost the leadership of true believers, it suffered depression, intellectual confusion and nervous ailments, despite its progress in all spheres of civilization. It might have had abundance of the means of physical comfort, intellectual enjoyment and material affluence, but it could not achieve true happiness.

Without doubt, then, the effort is worth it. We should strive with whatever we have and make what sacrifices are necessary to establish this truth of faith on earth. Mankind, however, will continue to turn away, as they did when they were addressed by Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muḥammad and others of God's noble messengers. They will continue to follow those who lead them far astray. Their leadership will continue to persecute the advocates of faith, inflicting on them whatever brutal treatment they can. Yet despite all this, the divine message will continue along its way, as God wants it to be, because the outcome deserves it all, even though it is no more than a single heart receiving God's light.

The fact that messengers continued to be sent by God, from the time of Noah to the time of Muḥammad, (peace be upon both of them), confirms that it is God's will that advocacy of the divine faith should continue so that it produces its extraordinary results. The minimum result is that the truth of faith becomes well settled in the hearts of its advocates so that they hold firmly to it even though they may be exposed

to death or what is worse than death. In this way, they will rise above all the lure of this life, and this by itself is a great gain for those advocates in person and for humanity as a whole. Indeed, humanity gains in honour through the presence of such people. It becomes worthy of the honour God gave it when He commanded the angels to prostrate themselves before Adam, the creature who corrupts the earth and sheds blood but who can, nevertheless, through his own efforts and sacrifices, become worthy of receiving a ray of God's light.

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسۡمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحۡمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

We sent Noah to his people: 'Warn your people, before grievous suffering befalls them.' (1)

إِنَّآ أَرۡسَلۡنَا نُوحًا إِلَىٰ قَوۡمِهِۦٓ أَنۡ أَنذِرۡ قَوۡمَكَ
مِن قَبۡلِ أَن يَأۡتِيَهُمۡ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٞ ١

He said: 'My people, I am here to warn you plainly. (2)

قَالَ يَٰقَوۡمِ إِنِّي لَكُمۡ نَذِيرٞ مُّبِينٌ ٢

Worship God alone and fear Him, and obey me. (3)

أَنِ ٱعۡبُدُواْ ٱللَّهَ وَٱتَّقُوهُ وَأَطِيعُونِ ٣

He will forgive you your sins and grant you respite for an appointed term. When God's appointed term comes, it can never be put back, if you but knew it.' (4)

يَغۡفِرۡ لَكُم مِّن ذُنُوبِكُمۡ وَيُؤَخِّرۡكُمۡ إِلَىٰٓ
أَجَلٖ مُّسَمًّىۚ إِنَّ أَجَلَ ٱللَّهِ إِذَا جَآءَ لَا يُؤَخَّرُۚ
لَوۡ كُنتُمۡ تَعۡلَمُونَ ٤

He said: 'My Lord! I have been pleading with my people night and day, (5)

قَالَ رَبِّ إِنِّي دَعَوۡتُ قَوۡمِي لَيۡلٗا وَنَهَارٗا ٥

but the more I call them, the further they run away. (6)

فَلَمۡ يَزِدۡهُمۡ دُعَآءِيٓ إِلَّا فِرَارٗا ٦

Whenever I call on them, so that You may forgive them, they thrust their fingers into their ears, draw their garments over their heads, grow obstinate and become even more arrogant and insolent. (7)

وَإِنِّي كُلَّمَا دَعَوۡتُهُمۡ لِتَغۡفِرَ لَهُمۡ جَعَلُوٓاْ
أَصَٰبِعَهُمۡ فِيٓ ءَاذَانِهِمۡ وَٱسۡتَغۡشَوۡاْ ثِيَابَهُمۡ
وَأَصَرُّواْ وَٱسۡتَكۡبَرُواْ ٱسۡتِكۡبَارٗا ٧

ثُمَّ إِنِّي دَعَوْتُهُمْ جِهَارًا ﴿٨﴾

I have called them openly; (8)

ثُمَّ إِنِّي أَعْلَنتُ لَهُمْ وَأَسْرَرْتُ لَهُمْ إِسْرَارًا ﴿٩﴾

I have preached to them in public, and I spoke to them secretly, in private. (9)

فَقُلْتُ اسْتَغْفِرُوا رَبَّكُمْ إِنَّهُ كَانَ غَفَّارًا ﴿١٠﴾

I said: "Ask your Lord for forgiveness: He is ever forgiving. (10)

يُرْسِلِ السَّمَاءَ عَلَيْكُم مِّدْرَارًا ﴿١١﴾

He will let loose the sky over you with abundance, (11)

وَيُمْدِدْكُم بِأَمْوَالٍ وَبَنِينَ وَيَجْعَل لَّكُمْ جَنَّاتٍ وَيَجْعَل لَّكُمْ أَنْهَارًا ﴿١٢﴾

and will give you wealth and children; and will provide you with gardens and rivers. (12)

مَّا لَكُمْ لَا تَرْجُونَ لِلَّهِ وَقَارًا ﴿١٣﴾

What is the matter with you? Why do you behave with such insolence towards your Lord, (13)

وَقَدْ خَلَقَكُمْ أَطْوَارًا ﴿١٤﴾

when it is He who has created you in successive stages? (14)

أَلَمْ تَرَوْا كَيْفَ خَلَقَ اللَّهُ سَبْعَ سَمَاوَاتٍ طِبَاقًا ﴿١٥﴾

Do you not see how God has created seven heavens in layers, (15)

وَجَعَلَ الْقَمَرَ فِيهِنَّ نُورًا وَجَعَلَ الشَّمْسَ سِرَاجًا ﴿١٦﴾

placing in them the moon for a light and the sun for a lantern? (16)

وَاللَّهُ أَنبَتَكُم مِّنَ الْأَرْضِ نَبَاتًا ﴿١٧﴾

God has made you spring from the earth like a plant, (17)

and He will return you into it and then bring you out again. (18)

ثُمَّ يُعِيدُكُمْ فِيهَا وَيُخْرِجُكُمْ إِخْرَاجًا ﴿١٨﴾

God has made the earth a vast expanse for you, (19)

وَٱللَّهُ جَعَلَ لَكُمُ ٱلْأَرْضَ بِسَاطًا ﴿١٩﴾

so that you may walk along its spacious paths."' (20)

لِّتَسْلُكُوا۟ مِنْهَا سُبُلًا فِجَاجًا ﴿٢٠﴾

Noah said: 'My Lord! They have disobeyed me and followed those whose wealth and children lead them increasingly into ruin. (21)

قَالَ نُوحٌ رَّبِّ إِنَّهُمْ عَصَوْنِى وَٱتَّبَعُوا۟ مَن
لَّمْ يَزِدْهُ مَالُهُۥ وَوَلَدُهُۥٓ إِلَّا خَسَارًا ﴿٢١﴾

They have devised a mighty plot, (22)

وَمَكَرُوا۟ مَكْرًا كُبَّارًا ﴿٢٢﴾

and said to each other: "Do not ever renounce your gods! Do not abandon Wadd, Suwā', Yaghūth, Ya'ūq or Nasr." (23)

وَقَالُوا۟ لَا تَذَرُنَّ ءَالِهَتَكُمْ وَلَا تَذَرُنَّ وَدًّا
وَلَا سُوَاعًا وَلَا يَغُوثَ وَيَعُوقَ وَنَسْرًا ﴿٢٣﴾

They have led many astray. Lord, grant the wrongdoers increase in nothing but error.' (24)

وَقَدْ أَضَلُّوا۟ كَثِيرًا ۖ وَلَا تَزِدِ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ
إِلَّا ضَلَٰلًا ﴿٢٤﴾

Because of their sins, they were drowned, and were made to enter the fire. They found none besides God to support them. (25)

مِّمَّا خَطِيٓـَٰٔتِهِمْ أُغْرِقُوا۟ فَأُدْخِلُوا۟ نَارًا فَلَمْ
يَجِدُوا۟ لَهُم مِّن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ أَنصَارًا ﴿٢٥﴾

And Noah said: 'Lord! Do not leave a single unbeliever on earth. (26)

وَقَالَ نُوحٌ رَّبِّ لَا تَذَرْ عَلَى ٱلْأَرْضِ مِنَ
ٱلْكَٰفِرِينَ دَيَّارًا ﴿٢٦﴾

If You spare them, they will lead Your servants astray and beget none but sinners and hardened unbelievers. (27)

إِنَّكَ إِن تَذَرْهُمْ يُضِلُّوا۟ عِبَادَكَ وَلَا يَلِدُوٓا۟ إِلَّا فَاجِرًا كَفَّارًا ﴿٢٧﴾

My Lord! Forgive me, my parents and everyone who enters my house as a believer. Forgive all believing men and women. To the wrongdoers grant You no increase except in perdition.' (28)

رَّبِّ ٱغْفِرْ لِى وَلِوَٰلِدَىَّ وَلِمَن دَخَلَ بَيْتِىَ مُؤْمِنًا وَلِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَٱلْمُؤْمِنَٰتِ وَلَا تَزِدِ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ إِلَّا تَبَارًۢا ﴿٢٨﴾

The Message in Brief

The *sūrah* begins with a statement defining the source of this message of divine faith: "*We sent Noah to his people.*" (Verse 1) This is the source that assigns tasks to God's messengers and from whom they learn the truth of faith. It is the source of all existence and all life. It is He who created mankind, giving their nature the ability to know and worship Him. When they deviated from this straight path, He sent them messengers to bring them back to Him. Noah was the first of these messengers after Adam. The Qur'ān does not mention a message given to Adam after his fall to earth and life thereon. Perhaps he was a teacher who taught his children and grandchildren. With the passage of time, they went astray and adopted idols as deities. These were at first symbols of certain forces they considered holy. Then, they forgot what the symbols signified and worshipped the idols themselves. The most important of those idols were the five mentioned in this *sūrah*. God sent them Noah to bring them back to believing in His oneness and give them the right concept of God, life and existence. Earlier scriptures mention Idrīs as a messenger of God prior to Noah. However, what such scriptures mention is not part of the Islamic faith, because they were subject to distortion, addition and omission.

When we read the stories of earlier prophets given in the Qur'ān, we tend to believe that Noah lived when humanity was still in its

dawn period. He spent 950 years of his life advocating God's message to his people who must have lived a similarly long life. This suggests that humans were still few in number. In saying this we draw on the observation that species that are small in number live long, and that the reverse is true. Perhaps this is a rule of balance. This is merely a personal point of view, but God knows best.

Having established the source of the message, the *sūrah* sums it up in a few words, and we learn that Noah was instructed to deliver a warning: "*Warn your people, before grievous suffering befalls them.*" (Verse 1) The report Noah presents to his Lord, as stated in the *sūrah*, shows that the state in which he found his people, heedless and arrogant, makes warning the sum of his message. In fact, the first thing he does by means of advocacy is to warn them of severe punishment, in either this world or the next, or in both.

The *sūrah* moves straight from assigning the task to its fulfilment, in which the delivery of the warning is prominent. However, this is coupled with a note that raises the hope of the forgiveness of past sins and the deferment of reckoning until the Day of Resurrection. Moreover, the *sūrah* gives a brief outline of the message Noah delivered to his people:

> *He said: 'My people, I am here to warn you plainly. Worship God alone and fear Him, and obey me. He will forgive you your sins and grant you respite for an appointed term. When God's appointed term comes, it can never be put back, if you but knew it.* (Verses 2–4)

"*My people, I am here to warn you plainly.*" (Verse 2) He immediately states his role as a warner, clearly explaining his argument. He does not hesitate or wrap his words in a false cover. He leaves no one in confusion as to what he has to say, or what those who reject his message can expect. What he calls for is plain and simple: "*Worship God alone and fear Him, and obey me.*" (Verse 3) All worship must be addressed to God alone, without partners. Fearing God should be the quality that is clearly reflected in feeling and behaviour. Obeying the messenger God sends to a people is the attitude that makes His orders the basis on which they build their way of life and how they determine their rules of behaviour.

These are the broad lines of divine faith in general, but messages may differ in points of detail as also in the concepts they outline, their relative scopes and how profound and comprehensive these are. To worship God alone provides a complete system of life that includes how man visualizes the nature of the Godhead and the nature of servitude to Him, the bond between the Creator and His creatures, as well as the nature of forces and values that operate in the universe and affect human life. Hence, a system for human life is developed on the basis of this concept, giving a special code of living. This code is based on the bond between God and His servants, and on the values He assigns to all things.

To be God-fearing is the true guarantee that people will follow this code of living, abide by it and never try to circumvent it or slacken in its implementation. Moreover, it is the quality that ensures sound moral behaviour that seeks no reward other than being acceptable to God. Moreover, obeying God's messenger is the means that ensures remaining consistent, receiving guidance from its original source. It maintains the link with heaven through the messenger who receives instructions from on high.

These were the broad lines that constituted what Noah called on his people to believe in. They remain the essence of the divine faith for every generation. God promised them in reward what He promises those who turn to Him in repentance: "*He will forgive you your sins and grant you respite for an appointed term.*" (Verse 4) This verse states the reward promised for those who respond to the call to worship God alone, fear Him and obey His messenger. The reward is forgiveness of past sins, a respite lasting until the time appointed for reckoning, which means until the Day of Judgement, so that they will not be punished in this life like other communities that were totally destroyed. Later in the *sūrah*, we see that Noah promised his people certain other things to be granted in this life.

Noah also confirms that this appointed time is inevitable: it comes at the moment determined for it. It will not be postponed like the delayed punishment in this world: "*When God's appointed term comes, it can never be put back, if you but knew it.*" (Verse 4) This statement may be understood to apply to every time appointed by God, so as to make this fact clear in their minds. It occurs at the appropriate place here, within

the context of the promise that the reckoning will be deferred to the Day of Judgement if they heeded Noah's advice.

Untiring Efforts

Noah began his noble efforts to present guidance to his people. He had no personal interest in the matter, and stood to make no gain to compensate for all the arrogance and ridicule he had to put up with. He continued to do this for a thousand years minus fifty, with the number of those who responded positively hardly increasing. On the other hand, however, the level of rejection and insistence on following old erring ways did increase. At the end, Noah presented his account to God, who had assigned him this arduous task. He described his efforts even though he knew that God was fully aware of all that he had done. He is, therefore, simply making his heart-felt complaint to God, the only One to whom prophets, messengers and true believers ever complain:

> *My Lord! I have been pleading with my people night and day, but the more I call them, the further they run away. Whenever I call on them, so that You may forgive them, they thrust their fingers into their ears, draw their garments over their heads, grow obstinate and become even more arrogant and insolent. I have called them openly; I have preached to them in public, and I spoke to them secretly, in private. I said: 'Ask your Lord for forgiveness: He is ever forgiving. He will let loose the sky over you with abundance, and will give you wealth and children; and will provide you with gardens and rivers. What is the matter with you? Why do you behave with such insolence towards your Lord, when it is He who has created you in successive stages? Do you not see how God has created seven heavens in layers, placing in them the moon for a light and the sun for a lantern? God has made you spring from the earth like a plant, and He will return you into it and then bring you out again. God has made the earth a vast expanse for you, so that you may walk along its spacious paths.'* (Verses 5–20)

Thus, Noah describes his untiring efforts at the end of his long, long journey: "*My Lord! I have been pleading with my people night and day.*"

(Verse 5) He never slackened or showed any sign of boredom or despair in the face of determined and increasing opposition: "*but the more I call them, the further they run away.*" (Verse 6) They ran away from the messenger who called on them to believe in God, the Giver of life, the Provider of everything they had and the Source of every light and guidance. Yet this messenger from whom they ran away never asked for anything in return for what he presented or taught them. He only called on them to believe so that they might be forgiven their sins.

When they could not physically run away, because he addressed them face to face, taking every opportunity to make his address heard, they loathed listening to him or even looking at him. They turned away in arrogance, intent on following their erring ways. "*Whenever I call on them, so that You may forgive them, they thrust their fingers into their ears, draw their garments over their heads, grow obstinate and become even more arrogant and insolent.*" (Verse 7) In this scene the advocate of the divine faith is seen using every opportunity to deliver his message, while they remain adamant, unwilling to hear. We see humanity here in its early stages, stubborn like a headstrong child, putting its fingers in its ears so that it does not hear, and covering its head and face. It is an image of childish resistance. The *sūrah* says they '*thrust their fingers into their ears*', yet people can only put the tips of their fingers into their ears. The statement, thus, imparts an impression of violent reaction, as if they wanted to put their whole fingers into their ears to ensure that nothing of Noah's words could be heard. How childish!

Provisions in Abundance

In his strenuous efforts to fulfil his mission, Noah used every method, addressing them openly at times, and speaking to them in private on others: "*I have called them openly; I have preached to them in public, and I spoke to them secretly, in private.*" (Verses 8–9) In all this, he put before them immeasurable gains both in this life and in the life to come. The first prospect he put before them was forgiveness of their sins: "*I said: Ask your Lord for forgiveness: He is ever forgiving.*" (Verse 10) He also put before them the prospect of abundant provisions to be granted through rain pouring down in plenty, so that plants can grow and rivers

run. He also added other types of God's grace, ones they loved dearly: children and wealth: "*He will let loose the sky over you with abundance, and will give you wealth and children; and will provide you with gardens and rivers.*" (Verses 11–12)

Noah linked granting such provisions to seeking God's forgiveness of sins and misdeeds. This correlation between following God's guidance and attaining purity of heart on the one hand and a life of plenty and prosperity on the other is stated in several places in the Qur'ān: "*had the people of those cities believed and been God-fearing, We would indeed have opened up for them blessings out of heaven and earth. But they disbelieved, so We smote them on account of what they had been doing.*" (7: 96) "*If only the people of earlier revelations would believe and be God-fearing, We should indeed efface their [past] bad deeds, and bring them into gardens of bliss. If they would observe the Torah and the Gospel and all that has been revealed to them by their Lord, they would indeed be given abundance from above and from beneath.*" (5: 65–66) "*Worship none but God. I come to you from Him as a warner and a bearer of glad tidings. Seek forgiveness of your Lord, and then turn towards Him in repentance, and He will grant you a goodly enjoyment of life for an appointed term. He will grant everyone with merit a full reward for his merit.*" (11: 2–3)

This is, then, a true rule repeatedly stated in the Qur'ān. It is based on certain conditions involving a promise by God and the rules He set for human life. History confirms its fulfilment during different generations. The rule applies to communities and nations, not to individuals. Every community that implemented God's law, truly looking up to Him, doing good and beneficial deeds and seeking His forgiveness in a way that reflected fearing Him, benefited by this promise. Every community that worshipped God and feared Him, implementing His law and establishing justice and security for all people, was given provisions in plenty and a life of strength and affluence.

Having said this, we realize that some communities are left to enjoy a life of power and prosperity, despite the fact that they are far from being God-fearing or following His guidance. This is merely a test: "*We test you all with evil and good by way of trial.*" (21: 35) Moreover, such prosperity is often accompanied by different ills such as the lack of social cohesion, loose morality, injustice, disregard for human dignity, etc. We

see today two superpowers,[1] seemingly enjoying power and plentiful provisions: one of them is capitalist while the other communist. In the first, morality has sunk to the lowest level. The prevailing vision of life has become so low that all life has become materialistic, measured by the dollar. In the other, the value of man has gone below the level of slavery. Intelligence agencies have become too powerful and people live in constant fear, threatened in their own homes. Several massacres have taken place, and no one is assured that by the morning his head will remain in place. A false allegation can easily find it chopped off. Neither condition can be described as a truly prosperous human life.

We continue with Noah and his untiring efforts. We see him trying to turn people's attentions to the signs pointing to God, be these from within themselves or in the world around them. He wonders at their carelessness and rudeness: "*What is the matter with you? Why do you behave with such insolence towards your Lord, when it is He who has created you in successive stages?*" (Verses 13–14)

These stages of creation to which Noah refers must have been something which people either knew about or could understand at that time. He is obviously reminding them of something they know and hopes will have the desired effect of leading them to a positive response. Most commentators on the Qur'ān say that the expression refers to the different stages the embryo goes through, starting with a gamete, then becoming a clinging cell mass, before it becomes a human embryo, and acquires a skeleton and is subsequently given its full shape and form. Noah's people could understand this because pregnant women suffered abortions at different stages of pregnancy, thus giving man a clear idea of how the human grows. This is one interpretation of the statement. It could also be a reference to what embryology says about the creation of man. It starts like a one-celled creature, then becomes like a multi-celled creature before acquiring the form of a water animal, then it becomes like a mammal, before it acquires human shape. This was however far from comprehensible to Noah's people, being only a very recent discovery. This interpretation may be the meaning of another Qur'ānic statement that mentions the stages of the embryo before saying: "*We then bring this*

1. This is a reference to the USA and the Soviet Union. – Editor's note.

into being as another creation." (23: 14) Both statements, however, may mean something else that remains beyond our present knowledge. Be that as it may, Noah draws the attention of his people to look at their creation and how it is done in stages. He reproaches them for knowing this and yet remaining insolent in their attitude towards their Lord. This is all very singular.

Signs in Plenty

Noah directs his people's attention to the open book of the universe: "*Do you not see how God has created seven heavens in layers, placing in them the moon for a light and the sun for a lantern?*" (Verses 15–16) We cannot specify a meaning for the '*seven heavens*' on the basis of scientific theories about the universe, for these are only theories. Noah simply draws their attention to the skies. He tells them, as God taught him, that there are seven heavens in layers, and that they include the sun and the moon, which they could obviously see, just as they saw what they called the sky, which is that familiar blue coloured space. To know what it is exactly is not necessary. Nor has it been properly proven even today. The invitation to look though is enough to reflect on the supreme power that has brought such great creatures into existence. This is what Noah wanted his people to do. He then invites them to look at their own creation, starting from dust and returning to it after death, and emphasizing the truth of resurrection: "*God has made you spring from the earth like a plant, and He will return you into it and then bring you out again.*" (Verses 17–18)

The reference to man originating from the earth like a plant is both amazing and inspiring. It is repeated in the Qur'ān in various forms: "*Good land brings forth its vegetation in abundance, by its Lord's leave, but from the bad land only poor and scant vegetation comes forth.*" (7: 58) This verse refers to the similarity of the origin of both man and vegetation. Both are referred to in the same verse stressing the truth of resurrection: "*Mankind! If you are in doubt as to the resurrection, remember that We have created you out of dust, then out of a gamete, then out of a clinging cell mass, then out of an organized and unorganized embryo, so that We might make things clear to you. We cause to rest in the [mothers'] wombs whatever*

We please for an appointed term, and then We bring you forth as infants, that you may grow up and attain your prime. Some of you die young, and some live on to abject old age when all that they once knew they know no more. You can see the earth dry and barren; and [suddenly,] when We send down water upon it, it stirs and swells and puts forth every kind of radiant bloom." (22: 5) In the following *sūrah*,[2] the stages of the embryo are outlined in similar terms to the verse above. It is then followed by this statement: "*And by means of this water We bring forth for you gardens of date-palms and vines.*" (23: 19)

This is certainly worth studying. It suggests that the origins of life on earth are the same, and that the making of man is the same as the making of plants. Man is made of the earth's simple elements and feeds on such elements to grow. Thus, he is a plant like the rest of earth's plants. He is given a form of life different from that of plants, but both originate from mother earth, which suckles them both. We see how faith gives a believer a complete and true concept of his relation to the earth and to other living things. This concept combines scientific accuracy with warm feelings, which is the distinctive mark of true Qur'ānic knowledge.

Those people who came out of the earth will go back into it, because God determines so, just like He brought them into being out of it. Their ashes become mixed with its dust and they become part of it again, just as they were before. Then again, God will bring them out like He did the first time. It is a simple matter that does not require a moment's hesitation if we only look at it from this Qur'ānic angle. Noah points out this truth to his people so that they feel how God's hand lets them grow out of the earth like plants do, and then returns them there. Once they do this, they can easily expect the second life and take it into account. It is so simple and easy, needing no further argument.

Finally, Noah directs his people's hearts to reflect on God's blessing as He enabled them to live easily on earth, conducting their various activities with ease and comfort: "*God has made the earth a vast expanse for you, so that you may walk along its spacious paths.*" (Verses 19–20) This reality is so close to them and they see it all the time in full view. They cannot escape it like they tried to escape from Noah and his warnings.

2. In verse 14 of *Sūrah* 23, The Believers.

In relation to them, the earth is stretched out like a vast expanse. Even in its mountains, God placed paths that are easy for them to traverse. They walk and travel even more easily on the plains. They can thus move about seeking God's bounty, and exchanging goods and benefits. They did not need scientific studies that sought to understand the natural laws that govern and facilitate their life on earth in order to appreciate all this. Indeed, the greater human knowledge gets the more evident the truth of this statement is.

Varied Methods

We see how Noah tried to address his people in various ways, employing a wide range of methods. We also see his patience, perseverance and conscientiousness. He continued to exert these efforts over 950 years before giving this report to his Lord, complaining of the response he had had to contend with. From his succinct and accurate account we see a splendid image of the great efforts he made. Yet all this is merely one ring in the chain of divine messages to mankind. So, what happens next?

> *Noah said: 'My Lord! They have disobeyed me and followed those whose wealth and children lead them increasingly into ruin. They have devised a mighty plot, and said to each other: "Do not ever renounce your gods! Do not abandon Wadd, Suwā', Yaghūth, Ya'ūq or Nasr." They have led many astray. Lord, grant the wrongdoers increase in nothing but error.'* (Verses 21–24)

It is a heart-felt complaint. After all Noah's endeavours, guidance and sound advice and the promise of an easy, plentiful life, they chose to disobey and follow the lead of those who had gone far astray, only because the latter enjoyed wealth, children and power. Yet such leaders benefit nothing by all these blessings. Indeed, their "*wealth and children lead them increasingly into ruin.*" (Verse 21) What they possessed of wealth and children tempted them to go further astray, a scenario that could only end in misery and ruin. Yet these leaders did not stop at just going astray. Instead: "*They have devised a mighty plot.*" (Verse 22)

Their plot was on a grand scale, and its aim was to foil Noah's efforts, to suppress his message and to prevent it from addressing people's hearts. They schemed to give their disbelief and ignorance an attractive colour. Therefore, they urged people to adhere to their false beliefs and to continue to worship those idols whom they called gods. They "*said to each other: 'Do not ever renounce your gods!'*" They sought to arouse people's personal emotions, making them feel that these idols were 'their own' gods. They mentioned the names of the most important ones, so as to stir people's false pride in them: "*Do not abandon Wadd, Suwā', Yaghūth, Ya'ūq or Nasr.*" (Verse 23) These were indeed the largest and the most important of their idols. Indeed, they continued to be worshipped in other ignorant communities until the time of the Islamic message.

This remains the practice of erring leaderships. They create idols that may differ in name and form, according to the going trends in different *jāhiliyyah* societies. They seek to rally the masses around such idols and stir their emotions to defend them so that they can lead them wherever they want to, ensuring that they remain in error. This is how they manage to lead people astray: "*They have led many astray.*" (Verse 24) Indeed every type of erring leadership tries to rally the people around idols, which may be in the form of statues, or humans or ideas. They are all the same, manipulated to turn people away from the divine message, creating a schism between them and its advocates. It is all part of a grand scheme, a mighty plot with a selfish end.

Noah's Prayer

A passionate prayer is then voiced by Noah against the oppressors, the wrongdoers who lead people astray through plots and schemes of their own devising: "*Lord, grant the wrongdoers increase in nothing but error.*" (Verse 24) It is the prayer of one who has tried for a long time, making every effort and using every method. Eventually, however, he came to the conclusion that those erring, wrongdoing hearts were altogether devoid of goodness, undeserving of divine guidance.

Before completing Noah's prayer, the *sūrah* gives us an image of the end suffered by those wrongdoers in this life and in the life to come.

Both situations are present in God's knowledge. They are events that admit no change:

> *Because of their sins, they were drowned, and were made to enter the fire. They found none besides God to support them.* (Verse 25)

It is because of their sins and disobedience that they were made to drown and enter the fire. The two events are intentionally joined in succession, because their entry into the fire is connected to their drowning. The time gap between the two is so short that it is almost non-existent; according to God's measures it is negligible. The sequence is there: they were drowned in this life and they are made to enter the fire in the life to come. What is in between is perhaps the torment in the grave during the short gap between the two lives. "*They found none besides God to support them.*" (Verse 25) None whatsoever! No children, no wealth, no power and no patron from among their alleged deities.

In a single short verse, these mighty ones are swept away and no mention is left of them in human memory. No details are given here of their drowning or the floods that swept them away. This because the *sūrah* wants to leave us with the impression of swift punishment. Indeed, it covers the gap between their drowning and their entry into hell with the conjunction *fa*, rendered in translation as 'and'. This is a common feature of the inimitable Qur'ānic style. Therefore, we do not go into any further details of this event here.

The *sūrah* then gives the remainder of Noah's passionate prayer:

> *And Noah said: 'Lord! Do not leave a single unbeliever on earth. If You spare them, they will lead Your servants astray and beget none but sinners and hardened unbelievers. My Lord! Forgive me, my parents and everyone who enters my house as a believer. Forgive all believing men and women. To the wrongdoers grant You no increase except in perdition.'* (Verses 26–28)

In his heart of hearts, Noah felt that the earth needed to have a complete change, a change that would eradicate the evil that had become so deeply entrenched among his people. Sometimes, only such

eradication of the wrongdoers from the face of the earth will suffice. Their continued presence may put the divine message under siege, preventing it from touching people's hearts. This is exactly the scenario Noah states in his appeal to God to destroy these tyrannical oppressors, leaving none of them to walk the earth. He says: "*If You spare them, they will lead Your servants astray.*" (Verse 27) Describing those people forced to go astray as '*Your servants*' suggests that they are the believers. This is a reference to how such wrongdoers will always use brute force to turn people away from divine faith. He may also mean that they lead others astray when people see them enjoying power and authority, without being punished for their wrongdoing.

Moreover, they create an environment in which unbelievers are born and reared. This whole environment of unbelief and its determined rejection of God's message leaves no way for the young to see the light. It overwhelms them with its erroneous beliefs and practices. It is to this fact that Noah, God's noble messenger, refers when he says that these wrongdoers will, "*beget none but sinners and hardened unbelievers.*" (Verse 27) They create within the community an atmosphere based on falsehood and establish systems, traditions and situations that only help to lead the young into sin and disbelief. Thus, the new generation will always be composed of '*sinners and hardened unbelievers*', as Noah said.

It is for this reason that Noah made his sweeping appeal to God, and God answered his prayer, washing that evil off the face of the earth. Noah ended his appeal against the unbelievers by a request to God to increase their ruin: "*To the wrongdoers grant You no increase except in perdition.*" (Verse 28)

Noah also made a different sort of passionate and humble appeal to God: "*My Lord! Forgive me, my parents and everyone who enters my house as a believer. Forgive all believing men and women.*" (Verse 28) His prayer that God forgives him his sins is an aspect of the good manners all prophets maintain when addressing God. Noah knows that he is only a human being appealing to God. He knows that no matter how diligent he is in his obedience and worship, he makes mistakes and remains short of the high standard believers should try to attain. He also realizes the truth the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) later expressed

when he said that no human being, not even a prophet, is admitted into heaven on the basis of his actions only, unless God bestows His grace on him. This appeal for forgiveness is exactly what he called upon his people to do, but they were too arrogant to take heed. Yet Noah, God's noble messenger who has untiringly sought to advocate God's message, seeks God's forgiveness at the moment he presents his account.

His prayer for his parents is an aspect of dutifulness towards parents who are believers. This is what we understand from the fact that he prayed for them. Had they been unbelievers, he would have been told not to pray for their forgiveness, as he was told that his son, an unbeliever, met his merited fate when he was drowned with the rest of the unbelievers. This is clearly mentioned in *Sūrah* 11, Hūd.

His special prayer for everyone who entered his home as a believer marks the mutual love between believers. Everyone loves for others to receive the same grace as he receives. This special mention of those who enter his home refers to the fact that they were the ones to be saved from the floods; they were the ones on the Ark with him.

Noah's final prayer is for the forgiveness of all believing men and women throughout all generations and localities. It emphasizes the close bond that unites them all, different as their communities and times may be. This is a remarkable quality of the divine faith, establishing this strong bond of genuine love between all believers across the centuries. It tells of the hidden secret God has incorporated into the divine faith and placed in believers' hearts.

Contrasted with this love among believers is the genuine aversion expressed towards unbelievers: "*To the wrongdoers grant You no increase except in perdition.*" (Verse 28)

In this way does the *sūrah* conclude after having given us a bright picture of Noah's struggle, as contrasted with the unbelievers' stubborn rejection. It leaves us with feelings of love towards this great prophet, and admiration for his hard struggle. It strengthens our resolve to follow the same route no matter what hardship we have to endure and no matter what sacrifices we are called upon to make. It is the only route that ensures mankind attains the highest standard possible in their life on earth.

SŪRAH 72

Al-Jinn

(The Jinn)

Prologue

This *sūrah* presents us with something very clear even before we look at any of the specific ideas it tackles. It is a symphony ringing out clear, strong beats coupled with an air of calm sadness and reflective sorrow. Consistent with this phenomenon are the images and scenes the *sūrah* portrays and the inspiring statements it includes, particularly in its last passage after the *jinn* concluded their discourse. In this last part, the *sūrah* addresses the Prophet in a way that fills the listener with much sympathy. He is commanded to declare that he looks for nothing in respect of his message other than delivering it, and that he is closely watched by God as he goes about this task: "*Say: 'I invoke my Lord alone, and I associate no partners with Him.' Say: 'It is not in my power to cause you harm or to set you on the right course.' Say: 'No one can ever protect me from God, nor can I ever find a place to hide from Him. My task is only to deliver what I receive from God and His messages.' Whoever disobeys God and His Messenger will have the fire of hell, where they will abide for ever. When they see what they have been promised, they will realize who has the lesser help and is smaller in number. Say: 'I do not know whether that which you have been promised is imminent, or whether my Lord has set for it a distant term. He alone knows that which is beyond the reach of human perception, and He does not disclose His secrets to anyone except to*

a messenger whom He has been pleased to choose. He then sends watchers to walk before and behind him, to know that they have delivered their Lord's messages. He has full knowledge of all they have. He takes count of everything.' (Verses 20–28)

In addition, the *sūrah* delivers a special and psychological effect in its lucid presentation of what the *jinn* said and the truth included in their account. This truth is of great significance, inviting much reflection and contemplation. It also suits the sad overtone evident in the *sūrah*'s rhythm. It only needs to be read rather slowly to impart the feeling we have just outlined.

Support from Another World

The *sūrah* presents a testimony to the truth of many aspects of the divine faith from a different world, a world beyond that of man. These aspects were the subject of much argument by the unbelievers who either denied them or who arrived at assumptions lacking any supporting evidence. The unbelievers in Makkah sometimes alleged that Muḥammad (peace be upon him) was in contact with the *jinn* who taught him what to say about faith. Now, a group of the *jinn* give their testimony, stating that they did not know anything about the Qur'ān until they listened to Muḥammad (peace be upon him) reciting it, and that they were then overwhelmed by its powerful truth. In fact, its effect on them was so profound that they could not remain silent. They had to speak in detail about what they had heard and felt. Their discourse reflects their total amazement at this great event with its lasting effects on the heavens, the earth, humans, *jinn*, angels and stars. Indeed, its effects cover the entire universe. Their testimony undoubtedly has a strong effect on man too.

Moreover, the *jinn*'s statement corrects many aspects of superstition upheld by those addressed by the *sūrah* for the first time, and by many other people across successive generations. It presents clear facts about this type of God's creatures, without any exaggeration. The Arabs who were the first to be addressed by the Qur'ān believed that the *jinn* exercised much power on earth. When an Arab found himself at night in a valley or an open plain, he would seek shelter with the *jinnee* of that

place, saying: "I seek shelter with the master of this valley against the designs of the wicked elements among his people." When he had said so, he could then sleep in peace. They also believed that the *jinn* had knowledge of *ghayb*, or what lies beyond the reach of human perception. They would give information to soothsayers who would then make predictions. Some Arabs worshipped the *jinn*, alleging that they were related to God. Some suggested that God had a wife from among the *jinn* and that she gave birth to angels.

Belief in the *jinn* on lines similar to these is widespread in all *jāhiliyyah* societies. Indeed, some legends and superstitions about them continue to be spread in different environments, even in the present day.

While such superstitions used to circulate widely, giving people different ideas and concepts about them, there were also other people who denied their existence altogether. They described any talk about the *jinn* as superstitious. Therefore, Islam sets the record straight. It confirms their existence and corrects wrong ideas about them, freeing people from the shackles of fear about the *jinn* and submission to their alleged authority.

The *jinn* do exist. They describe themselves in this *sūrah* in the following words: "*Some among us are righteous and others less so: we follow widely divergent paths.*" (Verse 11) Some go astray and lead people astray, while others are naïve and can easily be deceived: "*Some foolish ones among us have been saying some outrageous things about God. Yet we had thought that no man or* jinn *would ever utter a lie about God.*" (Verses 4–5) They are susceptible to divine guidance, able to listen to the Qur'ān, understand it and be affected by it: "*Say: It has been revealed to me that a group of the* jinn *listened in and then said: 'We have heard a wondrous discourse, giving guidance to what is sagacious, and we have come to believe in it. We shall never associate partners with our Lord.*" (Verses 1–2) By their nature, they can be punished, and the results of belief and unbelief can affect them: "*When we heard the guidance, we came to believe in it. Whoever believes in his Lord need never fear loss or injustice. Some of us submit to Him and others are unfair. Those who submit to God are the ones who have endeavoured to attain what is right. But those who are unfair will be the fuel of hellfire.*" (Verses 13–15) When humans appeal to them, they cannot benefit them; on the contrary,

they increase their affliction: "*True, in the past some among mankind sought refuge with some of the* jinn, *but they caused them further trouble.*" (Verse 6) They have no knowledge of the realm beyond their perception, and they no longer have any contact with heaven: "*We tried to reach heaven, but found it full of mighty guards and shooting stars. We used to take up positions there to listen, but whoever tries to listen now will find a shooting star in wait for him. We do not know if this bodes evil for those who live on earth, or if their Lord intends to guide them to what is right.*" (Verses 8–10) They have no relation to God Almighty: "*Sublimely exalted is the glory of our Lord! He has taken to Himself neither consort nor son.*" (Verse 3) They have no power to resist God's will: "*We know that we can never elude God on earth, and we can never elude Him by flight.*" (Verse 12)

We learn all this about the *jinn* from what is mentioned in this *sūrah*. Some of their other characteristics are mentioned elsewhere in the Qur'ān. For example, there is the reference to those of them who were made subservient to the Prophet Solomon. They did not know of his death until sometime after it occurred, which confirms that they have no knowledge of what is beyond their faculties of perception: "*When We decreed his death, nothing showed them that he was dead except an earthworm that gnawed away at his staff. And when he fell to the ground, the* jinn *saw clearly that, had they understood the reality which was beyond [their] perception, they would not have remained in humiliating servitude.*" (34: 14) The Qur'ān also refers to a quality of *Iblīs* and his folk. *Iblīs*, or Satan, belonged to the *jinn*, but he is devoted totally to evil, corruption and tempting others to do evil: "*Surely, he and his tribe watch you from where you cannot perceive them.*" (7: 27) This implies that the *jinn* have a form that humans cannot see, while they can see us. In addition, *Sūrah* 55, The Lord of Grace, states from which substances the *jinn* and human beings are created: "*He created man from dried clay, like pottery, and created the* jinn *from raging flames of fire.*" (55: 14–15) All this gives us a clear picture of this species that is concealed from us. It confirms its existence and gives us many of its characteristics. At the same time, it shows as false many of the ideas and superstitions people held about these creatures. It gives us a clear and accurate picture of them, one that is free of wild conjecture.

The *sūrah* corrects what the Arab unbelievers and other people used to say about the *jinn*, believing that they had exceptional powers and a large role to play in the universe. Others who have denied the existence of these creatures outright, mocking anyone who so believes, do not tell us the basis of their denial. Do they claim that they know every type of creature in the universe and cannot find the *jinn* among them? No scientist has ever made such a claim. The earth contains many species of creation which are discovered from time to time. No one claims that there will ever be an end to the discovery of new species.

Do they believe that they know all the powers at play in the universe and cannot find the *jinn* among them? No one can make such a claim. Every day, new powers are discovered, after having previously been unknown to man. Scientists try hard to know more of the powers and forces in the universe. They declare, in an attitude of humility, which their scientific discoveries have taught them, that they still stand at the edge of the unknown in the universe, and that they have hardly scraped the surface of it all.

Have they seen all the powers man utilizes and yet still cannot see the *jinn* among these? Not so. Since they managed to produce nuclear fission, scientists speak of the electron as scientific truth, yet none of them has seen an electron. They do not have in their laboratories a machine that can isolate an electron!

Why, then, are they so insistent on negating the very existence of this species of creature when man's information about the universe, its forces and dwellers is so scanty? Is it because so many superstitions have been weaved around the *jinn*? If so, the proper course of action is to show how such superstitions are false, just as the Qur'ān does. It is certainly not right to counteract it by denying their existence without having any proper evidence to support such a claim. Since this belongs to the realm that lies beyond the reach of our own perceptive faculties, we should refer to the only source from which we have accurate and confirmed information. This source cannot be contradicted by preconceived ideas. What this source tells us is final.

The *Jinn's* Account

This *sūrah* contributes significantly to the formulation of the Islamic concept of the truth of the Godhead and servitude to Him, as well as the truth of the universe, the creatures living in it and their interrelations.

In the *jinn*'s account we have confirmation of God's oneness, a negation of His having a spouse or a son, affirmation of reckoning and requital in the life to come, and the fact that no creature can ever escape God anywhere in the universe. All will receive their fair dues. Some of the facts clearly stated by the *jinn* are then repeated in the part of the *sūrah* that addresses the Prophet: "*Say: 'I invoke my Lord alone, and I associate no partners with Him.'*" (Verse 20) "*Say: No one can ever protect me from God, nor can I ever find a place to hide from Him.*" (Verse 22)

The *jinn*'s account asserts that Godhead belongs only to God, and that servitude to Him is the highest status people can attain: "*Yet when God's servant stood up to pray to Him, they pressed in on him in multitude.*" (Verse 19) The *sūrah* confirms this truth in its address to the Prophet: "*Say: It is not in my power to cause you harm or to set you on the right course.*" (Verse 21) The world beyond our perception belongs totally to God alone, and the *jinn* know nothing about it: "*We do not know if this bodes evil for those who live on earth, or if their Lord intends to guide them to what is right.*" (Verse 10) It is also unknown to God's messengers, apart from what God, in His infinite wisdom, chooses to inform them of: "*Say: I do not know whether that which you have been promised is imminent, or whether my Lord has set for it a distant term. He alone knows that which is beyond the reach of human perception, and He does not disclose His secrets to anyone except to a messenger whom He has been pleased to choose. He then sends watchers to walk before and behind him.*" (Verses 25–27)

We learn from this *sūrah* that some interaction may take place between different types of creatures even though they may have totally different natures and constitutions. An example of such interaction is what happens between man and the *jinn*, as mentioned in this *sūrah* as elsewhere in the Qur'ān. Even in his abode on earth, man is not isolated from other creation. He may have some interaction with them. The isolation man

feels, as a species or a community or an individual, does not apply to the nature of the universe. This idea should broaden man's feelings towards the universe and the creatures, forces and secrets it contains. Man may not be aware of these, but they exist in the world around him. He is not the only dweller in the universe as he sometimes imagines.

Moreover, there is a definite causal relation between people's following the right way and the operation of some forces in the universe, according to God's will and its effect on His creatures: "*Had they established themselves on the right way, We would have given them abundant water to drink, so as to test them by this means. Anyone who turns away from his Lord's revelation will be made to endure uphill suffering.*" (Verses 16–17) This is a truth that forms part of the Islamic concept of the interrelation between man, the universe and God's will.

As we see, the *sūrah* stretches with its inspiration over great areas and wide horizons, even though it consists of no more than 28 verses. Furthermore, it was revealed on a particular occasion to report on a certain event.

Reports of the Event

There are a number of different reports about the *jinn* listening to the Qur'ān. One quotes 'Abdullāh ibn 'Abbās as saying: "God's Messenger did not read the Qur'ān to the *jinn*, nor did he see them. What took place was that the Prophet and a group of his Companions once went to the 'Ukāẓ market place. The *jinn* had previously been barred from trying to reach heaven to eavesdrop and were struck by shooting stars. They went back to their people and told them what happened. They said: 'Something must have happened to prevent you from learning anything from heaven. Go in pursuit of information throughout the earth to find out what has happened. They went in groups, travelling east and west throughout the earth. The group that went to Tihamah drew close to the Prophet when he was in the Nakhlah Valley, going to 'Ukāẓ. He was leading his Companions in the *Fajr*, or Dawn, Prayer. They listened to him reciting the Qur'ān. When he finished his recitation, they said to each other: 'This is indeed what happened to cause you to be barred from learning news from on high.' They went back to their people and

told them: '*We have heard a wondrous discourse, giving guidance to what is sagacious, and we have come to believe in it. We shall never associate partners with our Lord.*' God then revealed the *sūrah*, The *Jinn*, to the Prophet speaking of this event." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.]

Another report mentions that 'Abdullāh ibn Mas'ūd gave the following answer to the question about whether any of the Prophet's Companions were present with him when he met the *jinn*: "None of us were present. However, we were with him one night when he went missing. We looked for him everywhere, in valleys and on the paths, but could not find him. Some of us thought that he might have been taken or even killed. That was our worst night. In the morning, we saw him coming to us from the direction of Ḥirā'. We said: 'Messenger of God! We missed you and looked for you everywhere but could not find you. We had such a bad night.' He said: 'A caller from the *jinn* came to me and so I went and read the Qur'ān to them.' He took us to the place and showed us their traces and the remains of the fires they lit. They asked him for food. He said: 'Every bone of an animal slaughtered under God's name will be in your hands full of meat; and all animal droppings will be wholesome feed for your animals.' The Prophet then said to us: 'Do not use these to wipe off your personal dirt, because they are food for your brethren'." [Related by Muslim.]

There is a third report also attributed to Ibn Mas'ūd, but the chain of transmission of the one we have quoted makes it more reliable. We will, therefore, leave this and similar reports aside. The two authentic reports we have quoted seem to be mutually contradictory. Ibn 'Abbās says that the Prophet did not know of the *jinn*'s presence when they listened to him reading the Qur'ān, while Ibn Mas'ūd says that they called upon the Prophet and he went with them. Al-Bayhaqī resolves this apparent contradiction by saying that the two reports speak of two different occasions, not just one.

A different report is given by Ibn Isḥāq in his biography of the Prophet. He says that after the death of Abū Ṭālib, the Prophet's uncle, the Quraysh were able to inflict more harm on him than they could ever do during his uncle's lifetime. Therefore, the Prophet went to Taif, seeking support from the Thaqīf, the major tribe living there. He went there alone, hoping to gain a positive response:

Once at Ṭā'if, the Prophet approached its leading personalities, explaining his message… For ten days the Prophet spoke to one of their chiefs after another. None gave him a word of encouragement. The worst response came from three brothers, the sons of 'Amr ibn 'Umayr. These three brothers, 'Abd Yalīl, Mas'ūd and Ḥabīb, were the recognized leaders of Ṭā'if. One of them was married to a Qurayshi woman and the Prophet hoped that this relationship would work in his favour. In the event the three men were extremely rude in their rejection of the Prophet's approach.

The first one said: "I would tear the robes off the Ka'bah if it was true that God has chosen you as His Messenger." The second said: "Has God found no one other than you to be His Messenger?" The third said: "By God, I will never speak to you. If it is true that you are God's Messenger, you are too great for me to speak to you. If, on the other hand, you are lying, you are not worth answering."

Fearing that the news of their rejection would serve to intensify the Quraysh's hostility to Islam, the Prophet requested the Thaqīf notables not to publicize his mission. They refused him even that. Instead they set on him a crowd of their teenagers and servants, who chased and stoned him. His feet were soon bleeding and he was in a very sorry state. Zayd tried hard to defend him and protect him from the stones. The Prophet then sought refuge in an orchard which belonged to two brothers from Makkah. They were in their orchard, and they saw Muḥammad when he entered. At first they watched him quietly, but he did not see them.

As the Prophet sat down, he said this highly emotional and touching prayer:

> To You, My Lord, I complain of my weakness, lack of support and the humiliation I am made to receive.
>
> Most compassionate and merciful! You are the Lord of the weak, and You are my Lord. To whom do You leave me? To a distant person who receives me with hostility? Or to an enemy to whom You have given power over me?
>
> If You are not displeased with me, I do not care what I face. I would, however, be much happier with Your mercy.

> I seek refuge in the light of Your face by which all darkness is dispelled and both this life and the life to come are put on their right courses against incurring Your wrath or being the subject of Your anger. To You I submit, until I earn Your pleasure. Everything is powerless without Your support.

The owners of the orchard were none other than 'Utbah and Shaybah, the two sons of Rabī'ah, who commanded positions of high esteem in the Quraysh. Although the two brothers were opposed to Islam and to Muḥammad, they felt sorry for him in his unenviable plight. Therefore, they called a servant of theirs, named 'Addās, and told him to take a bunch of grapes on a plate to Muḥammad. 'Addās, who was a Christian from the Iraqi town of Nineveh, complied.

As the Prophet took the grapes he said, as Muslims do before eating: 'In the name of God.' Surprised, 'Addās said: 'This is something no one in these areas says.' When 'Addās answered the Prophet's question about his religion and place of origin, the Prophet commented: 'Then you come from the same place as the noble, divine Jonah.' Even more surprised, 'Addās asked: 'How did you know about Jonah? When I left Nineveh, not even ten people knew anything about him.' The Prophet said: 'He was my brother. Like me, he was a prophet.' 'Addās then kissed the Prophet's head, hands and feet in a gesture of genuine love and respect. As they watched, one of the two owners of the orchard said to his brother: 'That man has certainly spoilt your slave.'

When 'Addās joined them they asked him the reason for his very respectful attitude to Muḥammad. He said: 'There can be no one on earth better than him. He has indeed told me something which no one but a Prophet would know.' They said: 'You should be careful, 'Addās. He may try to convert you while your religion is better than his.'[1]

1. Ibn Hishām, *Al-Sīrah al-Nabawiyyah*, Vol. II, pp. 60–63. Also, Ibn Sayyid al-Nās, *'Uyūn al-Athar*, pp. 231–233. Also, Adil Salahi (2002), *Muhammad: Man and Prophet*, Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, pp. 179–180.

Continuing this report, Ibn Isḥāq says: "When the Prophet despaired of receiving any good response in Ṭā'if, he returned to Makkah. When he was at Nakhlah, he stood up praying in the middle of the night. It was at this time that a group of the *jinn* – seven in number from the town of Naṣībīn [in northern Syria] as I was told – passed by and listened to him reading the Qur'ān. When he finished his prayer, they left hurriedly to warn their people. They believed in Islam and God told the Prophet of what happened: "*We sent to you a group of* jinn *to listen to the Qur'ān. When they heard it, they said to one another, 'Listen in silence!' When the recitation ended, they returned to their people to warn them. 'Our people,' they said, 'we have been listening to revelation bestowed from on high after Moses, confirming what came before it. It guides to the truth and to a straight path. Our people! Respond to God's call and have faith in Him. He will forgive you your sins and deliver you from grievous suffering.*" (46: 29–31) He also revealed *Sūrah* 72, The Jinn."

Ibn Kathīr has the following comment to make on this last report: "The event itself is true, but to say that it took place on that night is questionable. The *jinn*'s listening to the Qur'ān occurred during the early days of prophethood, as clearly indicated in the above-quoted *ḥadīth* of Ibn 'Abbās. On the other hand, the Prophet's trip to Ṭā'if occurred after his uncle's death, one or two years before his migration to Madīnah, as confirmed by Ibn Isḥāq and others."

If Ibn Isḥāq's report is true and this incident took place when the Prophet was on his way back from Ṭā'if, hurt by the arrogant response of the Thaqīf elders, and after he had expressed his passionate prayer appealing to God, his Lord and Protector, then it is most remarkable that God should have sent him those *jinn* and told him about what they said to their people. Moreover, it gives fine impressions of God's care.

At whichever time and place this event took place, it is certainly very significant in itself and in what the *jinn* had to say about the Qur'ān and Islam. We will now discuss its presentation in the *sūrah*.

Al-Jinn (The Jinn)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

Say: It has been revealed to me that a group of the *jinn* listened in and then said: 'We have heard a wondrous discourse, (1)

قُلْ أُوحِيَ إِلَيَّ أَنَّهُ ٱسْتَمَعَ نَفَرٌ مِّنَ ٱلْجِنِّ
فَقَالُوٓا۟ إِنَّا سَمِعْنَا قُرْءَانًا عَجَبًا ﴿١﴾

giving guidance to what is sagacious, and we have come to believe in it. We shall never associate partners with our Lord. (2)

يَهْدِىٓ إِلَى ٱلرُّشْدِ فَـَٔامَنَّا بِهِۦ ۖ وَلَن
نُّشْرِكَ بِرَبِّنَآ أَحَدًا ﴿٢﴾

Sublimely exalted is the glory of our Lord! He has taken to Himself neither consort nor son. (3)

وَأَنَّهُۥ تَعَٰلَىٰ جَدُّ رَبِّنَا مَا ٱتَّخَذَ صَٰحِبَةً
وَلَا وَلَدًا ﴿٣﴾

Some foolish ones among us have been saying some outrageous things about God. (4)

وَأَنَّهُۥ كَانَ يَقُولُ سَفِيهُنَا عَلَى ٱللَّهِ
شَطَطًا ﴿٤﴾

Yet we had thought that no man or *jinn* would ever utter a lie about God. (5)

وَأَنَّا ظَنَنَّآ أَن لَّن تَقُولَ ٱلْإِنسُ وَٱلْجِنُّ
عَلَى ٱللَّهِ كَذِبًا ﴿٥﴾

True, in the past some among mankind sought refuge with some of the *jinn*, but they caused them further trouble. (6)

وَأَنَّهُۥ كَانَ رِجَالٌ مِّنَ ٱلْإِنسِ يَعُوذُونَ بِرِجَالٍ
مِّنَ ٱلْجِنِّ فَزَادُوهُمْ رَهَقًا ﴿٦﴾

They thus came to think, just like you thought, that God will not raise anyone. (7)

وَأَنَّهُمْ ظَنُّوا۟ كَمَا ظَنَنتُمْ أَن لَّن يَبْعَثَ
ٱللَّهُ أَحَدًا ﴿٧﴾

We tried to reach heaven, but found it full of mighty guards and shooting stars. (8)

وَأَنَّا لَمَسْنَا ٱلسَّمَآءَ فَوَجَدْنَٰهَا مُلِئَتْ
حَرَسًا شَدِيدًا وَشُهُبًا ﴿٨﴾

We used to take up positions there to listen, but whoever tries to listen now will find a shooting star in wait for him. (9)

وَأَنَّا كُنَّا نَقْعُدُ مِنْهَا مَقَٰعِدَ لِلسَّمْعِ ۖ فَمَن
يَسْتَمِعِ ٱلْـَٔانَ يَجِدْ لَهُۥ شِهَابًا رَّصَدًا ﴿٩﴾

We do not know if this bodes evil for those who live on earth, or if their Lord intends to guide them to what is right. (10)

وَأَنَّا لَا نَدْرِىٓ أَشَرٌّ أُرِيدَ بِمَن فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ
أَمْ أَرَادَ بِهِمْ رَبُّهُمْ رَشَدًا ﴿١٠﴾

Some among us are righteous and others less so: we follow widely divergent paths. (11)

وَأَنَّا مِنَّا ٱلصَّٰلِحُونَ وَمِنَّا دُونَ ذَٰلِكَ ۖ
كُنَّا طَرَآئِقَ قِدَدًا ﴿١١﴾

We know that we can never elude God on earth, and we can never elude Him by flight. (12)

وَأَنَّا ظَنَنَّآ أَن لَّن نُّعْجِزَ ٱللَّهَ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ
وَلَن نُّعْجِزَهُۥ هَرَبًا ﴿١٢﴾

When we heard the guidance, we came to believe in it. Whoever believes in his Lord need never fear loss or injustice. (13)

وَأَنَّا لَمَّا سَمِعْنَا ٱلْهُدَىٰٓ ءَامَنَّا بِهِۦ ۖ
فَمَن يُؤْمِنۢ بِرَبِّهِۦ فَلَا يَخَافُ بَخْسًا
وَلَا رَهَقًا ﴿١٣﴾

Some of us submit to Him and others are unfair. Those who submit to God are the ones who have endeavoured to attain what is right. (14)

وَأَنَّا مِنَّا ٱلْمُسْلِمُونَ وَمِنَّا ٱلْقَٰسِطُونَ ۖ
فَمَنْ أَسْلَمَ فَأُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ تَحَرَّوْا۟ رَشَدًا ﴿١٤﴾

But those who are unfair will be the fuel of hellfire. (15)

وَأَمَّا ٱلْقَـٰسِطُونَ فَكَانُوا۟ لِجَهَنَّمَ
حَطَبًا ١٥

Had they established themselves on the right way, We would have given them abundant water to drink, (16)

وَأَلَّوِ ٱسْتَقَـٰمُوا۟ عَلَى ٱلطَّرِيقَةِ
لَأَسْقَيْنَـٰهُم مَّآءً غَدَقًا ١٦

so as to test them by this means. Anyone who turns away from his Lord's revelation will be made to endure uphill suffering. (17)

لِّنَفْتِنَهُمْ فِيهِ ۚ وَمَن يُعْرِضْ عَن ذِكْرِ رَبِّهِۦ
يَسْلُكْهُ عَذَابًا صَعَدًا ١٧

Places of worship are for God alone; therefore, do not invoke anyone other than God. (18)

وَأَنَّ ٱلْمَسَـٰجِدَ لِلَّهِ فَلَا تَدْعُوا۟ مَعَ
ٱللَّهِ أَحَدًا ١٨

Yet when God's servant stood up to pray to Him, they pressed in on him in multitude. (19)

وَأَنَّهُۥ لَمَّا قَامَ عَبْدُ ٱللَّهِ يَدْعُوهُ كَادُوا۟
يَكُونُونَ عَلَيْهِ لِبَدًا ١٩

Say: 'I invoke my Lord alone, and I associate no partners with Him.' (20)

قُلْ إِنَّمَآ أَدْعُوا۟ رَبِّى وَلَآ أُشْرِكُ بِهِۦٓ أَحَدًا ٢٠

Say: 'It is not in my power to cause you harm or to set you on the right course.' (21)

قُلْ إِنِّى لَآ أَمْلِكُ لَكُمْ ضَرًّا وَلَا رَشَدًا ٢١

Say: 'No one can ever protect me from God, nor can I ever find a place to hide from Him. (22)

قُلْ إِنِّى لَن يُجِيرَنِى مِنَ ٱللَّهِ أَحَدٌ وَلَنْ
أَجِدَ مِن دُونِهِۦ مُلْتَحَدًا ٢٢

إِلَّا بَلَٰغًا مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ وَرِسَٰلَٰتِهِۦۚ وَمَن يَعۡصِ
ٱللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُۥ فَإِنَّ لَهُۥ نَارَ جَهَنَّمَ
خَٰلِدِينَ فِيهَآ أَبَدًا ﴿٢٣﴾

My task is only to deliver what I receive from God and His messages.' Whoever disobeys God and His Messenger will have the fire of hell, where they will abide for ever. (23)

حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا رَأَوۡاْ مَا يُوعَدُونَ فَسَيَعۡلَمُونَ
مَنۡ أَضۡعَفُ نَاصِرٗا وَأَقَلُّ عَدَدٗا ﴿٢٤﴾

When they see what they have been promised, they will realize who has the lesser help and is smaller in number. (24)

قُلۡ إِنۡ أَدۡرِيٓ أَقَرِيبٞ مَّا تُوعَدُونَ أَمۡ
يَجۡعَلُ لَهُۥ رَبِّيٓ أَمَدًا ﴿٢٥﴾

Say: 'I do not know whether that which you have been promised is imminent, or whether my Lord has set for it a distant term. (25)

عَٰلِمُ ٱلۡغَيۡبِ فَلَا يُظۡهِرُ عَلَىٰ
غَيۡبِهِۦٓ أَحَدًا ﴿٢٦﴾

He alone knows that which is beyond the reach of human perception, and He does not disclose His secrets to anyone (26)

إِلَّا مَنِ ٱرۡتَضَىٰ مِن رَّسُولٖ فَإِنَّهُۥ يَسۡلُكُ
مِنۢ بَيۡنِ يَدَيۡهِ وَمِنۡ خَلۡفِهِۦ رَصَدٗا ﴿٢٧﴾

except to a messenger whom He has been pleased to choose. He then sends watchers to walk before and behind him, (27)

لِّيَعۡلَمَ أَن قَدۡ أَبۡلَغُواْ رِسَٰلَٰتِ رَبِّهِمۡ
وَأَحَاطَ بِمَا لَدَيۡهِمۡ وَأَحۡصَىٰ كُلَّ شَيۡءٍ
عَدَدَۢا ﴿٢٨﴾

to know that they have delivered their Lord's messages. He has full knowledge of all they have. He takes count of everything.' (28)

A Surprise for the *Jinn*

> *Say: It has been revealed to me that a group of the* jinn *listened in and then said: 'We have heard a wondrous discourse, giving guidance to what is sagacious, and we have come to believe in it. We shall never associate partners with our Lord. Sublimely exalted is the glory of our Lord! He has taken to Himself neither consort nor son. Some foolish ones among us have been saying some outrageous things about God. Yet we had thought that no man or* jinn *would ever utter a lie about God. True, in the past some among mankind sought refuge with some of the* jinn, *but they caused them further trouble. They thus came to think, just like you thought, that God will not raise anyone.'* (Verses 1–7)

The Arabic word *nafar*, used in the opening verse and translated here as 'a group', signifies a group of people between three and nine in number. Some reports suggest that they were seven.

This opening suggests that the Prophet learnt of the *jinn*'s listening to his recitation and what they did afterwards through revelation from on high. It is God who told him about that of which he had no knowledge. This might have been the first time, and there might have been one or more other occasions when the Prophet read out the Qur'ān to the *jinn*, as reported by Jābir in a *ḥadīth* that says: "God's Messenger read out *Sūrah* 55, The Lord of Grace, in full to his Companions. When he finished, they were silent. He said: 'I read this *sūrah* to the *jinn* and they gave a better response than you. Every time I read the repeated verse, '*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*' they said: 'None of Your blessings, our Lord, do we deny. All thanks are due to You'." [Related by al-Tirmidhī.] This report confirms the one by Ibn Mas'ūd mentioned in the Prologue.

The event mentioned in the present *sūrah* must be the same referred to in *Sūrah* 46, The Sand Dunes, which says: "*We sent to you a group of* jinn *to listen to the Qur'ān. When they heard it, they said to one another, 'Listen in silence!' When the recitation ended, they returned to their people to warn them. 'Our people,' they said, 'we have been listening to revelation bestowed from on high after Moses, confirming what came before it. It guides to the truth and to a straight path. 'Our people! Respond to God's call and have*

faith in Him. He will forgive you your sins and deliver you from grievous suffering. He who does not respond to God's call cannot elude Him on earth, nor will they have any protector against Him. They are indeed in manifest error.'" (Verses 29–32) These verses speak, as does the present *sūrah*, of the great surprise felt by the *jinn* when they first listened to the Qur'ān. It had such a great effect on their minds, hearts and feelings. They were filled with emotion, resulting in their travel in great haste to tell their people. Their report expresses such overflowing emotions. Indeed, it is stated in an exceptionally fluent, warm, charged and very happy style. The surprise for them was great and their reaction was only natural.

"*We have heard a wondrous discourse.*" (Verse 1) The first thing they realize about the Qur'ānic discourse is that it is unfamiliar, and that it makes the listener wonder. This is how the Qur'ān is received by anyone who listens with an open and positive mind. He will find that the Qur'ān contains intrinsic power, strong appeal and beautiful music that touch hearts and feelings. It is '*wondrous*' indeed, which tells us that the group of *jinn* listening to it had refined literary tastes.

"*Giving guidance to what is sagacious.*" (Verse 2) This is the second prominent feature of the Qur'ān which the *jinn* immediately felt within their hearts. That they use the word 'sagacious' to describe it is particularly significant. It is true that the Qur'ān guides to what is right and sensible, but the term 'sagacious' also connotes maturity and wisdom that distinguishes right from wrong. It adds an element of awareness that naturally guides to the truth and to what is right and good. It establishes a bond with the source of light and guidance, as well as harmony with major universal laws. In doing so, the Qur'ān guides to what is sagacious, as indeed it does by providing a code of living the like of which has never been experienced by any other human community. Yet this system enabled individuals and communities to attain sublime standards in personal morality and values as well as in social relations and interactions.

"*And we have come to believe in it.*" (Verse 2) This is the natural and sound reaction to listening to the Qur'ān and understanding its nature. The *sūrah* puts this response to the unbelievers in Makkah who used to listen to the Qur'ān but who would not believe in it. They even attributed it to the *jinn*, alleging that the Prophet was a soothsayer, a poet or a

madman, influenced by the *jinn*. Here, we see the *jinn* wondering at the Qur'ān, profoundly influenced by its discourse, unable to resist it. We see them able to discern the truth and submit to it: "*We have come to believe in it.*" They could not turn away from the truth they clearly felt.

"*We shall never associate partners with our Lord.*" (Verse 2) Theirs, then, is a case of complete faith, untainted by delusions, superstitions or any element of polytheism. It is faith based on understanding the truth presented by the Qur'ān, i.e. the truth of God's absolute oneness.

"*Sublimely exalted is the glory of our Lord! He has taken to Himself neither consort nor son.*" (Verse 3) The *sūrah* uses here the Arabic word *jadd,* attributing it to God. This word connotes share, position, authority and greatness. All these connotations are meant here. Hence the translation of the first sentence in the verse. What is intended here is to impart a clear feeling of God's greatness and His being far above taking a wife or child for Himself. The Arabs used to allege that the angels were God's daughters through a marriage to the *jinn*. Now the *jinn* deny such a superstition in a most expressive way. They glorify God and deny that such a notion could ever have happened. The *jinn* would have proudly proclaimed such a connection had there been any possibility of it ever having taken place. Their denial delivers a massive blow at the unbelievers' baseless claims, and indeed at every similar claim alleging that God has taken a son to Himself in any way, shape or form.

"*Some foolish ones among us have been saying some outrageous things about God. Yet we had thought that no man or* jinn *would ever utter a lie about God.*" (Verses 4–5) This is a critical examination of what the *jinn* used to hear some of the foolish among them say. Those are the ones who did not believe in God's oneness and who alleged that He had a wife, a son and partners. Now that they have heard the Qur'ān, they realize this is all absolutely false. Those who promote such ideas are, therefore, foolish, lacking sound mind. They explain their own earlier belief of what those foolish ones said by the fact that they could not imagine that any creature, human or *jinn*, would ever perpetrate a lie about God. To them, that was an absolute enormity. Therefore, when those foolish people told them that God had a wife, a son and partners, they believed them because they could not conceive of how anyone would knowingly utter an untruth about God. Indeed, their

perception of the enormity of lying about God is what qualified this group of *jinn* to immediately declare their belief when they listened to the Qur'ān. It shows that their hearts and minds were free of deviation. They had only fallen into error as a result of the trust they assumed in other people. When they heard the truth, they immediately realized it. They recognized it and submitted to it. They made their declaration definitive: "*We have heard a wondrous discourse, giving guidance to what is sagacious, and we have come to believe in it. We shall never associate partners with our Lord. Sublimely exalted is the glory of our Lord! He has taken to Himself neither consort nor son.*" (Verses 1–3)

This immediate and instinctive reaction to the truth should have been enough to awaken many of those who were deluded by the Quraysh elders and their claims that God had partners, or a wife and son. It should have made them more cautious about what they heard and alerted them to the need to examine what the Prophet Muḥammad said in a meaningful attempt to arrive at the truth. This should have been enough to shake the blind trust they placed in what those foolish Quraysh elders said to the contrary. This is what the *sūrah* intends by virtue of its effects. It is all intended as part of its long treatment of the lingering traces of *jāhiliyyah* in people's minds and thoughts, many of whom were simple but deluded by false claims and superstitions.

Between Humans and *Jinn*

"*True, in the past some among mankind sought refuge with some of the* jinn, *but they caused them further trouble.*" (Verse 6) Here, the *jinn* refer to what was widely accepted in pre-Islamic days in Arabian society, and which remains accepted in many other communities, claiming that the *jinn,* exercized power on the earth and against humans. Indeed, it was thought that they were able to bring about benefit and cause harm to people, and that they were in full control of certain areas of land, sea and air. Satan is given access to people's minds and hearts. Only those who seek protection with God are saved from him. Whoever listens to him is listening to his own worst enemy who will not bring him any benefit. On the contrary, he will increase his problems. This group of *jinn* report on what used to happen: "*True, in the past some among mankind*

to following guidance or error.[3] Hence, it is an aspect of God's grace that He has willed to help mankind by sending them messengers to promote goodness in their natures and to enhance their tendency to follow guidance. There are no grounds, then, for thinking that God would not be sending any messengers.

This is true when we take the verse to refer to sending God's messengers. If we take the reference to mean resurrection on the Day of Judgement, we say again that it is necessary for humans, since they do not finish their life's account in this present world. This is to fulfil a certain purpose of God's. It relates to the design He has chosen for the universe, yet we know nothing about this design. He has decreed that all will be resurrected to receive their accounts and resume life along the path their first life qualifies them for. Again, this leaves no room to suggest that God will not resurrect anyone. Such a suggestion is contrary to believing in God's wisdom and perfection.

This group of *jinn* presents the right belief directly to their people. Furthermore, the Qur'ān reports it to show the falsehood in the unbelievers' way of thinking.

Shooting Stars

Continuing to report on what they learnt about the last divine message and its echoes throughout the universe, the *jinn* disclaim any knowledge of the realm that lies beyond the reach of theirs and human perception. They disclaim having any role in it:

> *We tried to reach heaven, but found it full of mighty guards and shooting stars. We used to take up positions there to listen, but whoever tries to listen now will find a shooting star in wait for him. We do not know if this bodes evil for those who live on earth, or if their Lord intends to guide them to what is right.* (Verses 8–10)

3. We also learn from this *sūrah* that the *jinn* also have a dual nature, except for *Iblīs* or Satan who belonged to them but dedicated himself totally to evil. He was expelled from God's mercy and became totally evil with no room for goodness in him.

This suggests that in the period that preceded the revelation of God's final message, perhaps in between it and Jesus' message, the *jinn* used to try to reach up to heaven to eavesdrop on the angels and their discussion of their assignments with respect to the affairs of God's creatures on earth. They would impart such information to their human friends, the soothsayers and astrologers, to enable them to delude people. In accordance with Satan's plot, these soothsayers and astrologers would then use a small portion of the truth they so received and mix it with much falsehood, circulating it among people. This might have been the case when there was no messenger preaching the divine message on earth, in the intervening period between Jesus and Muḥammad (peace be upon them both). What form this took we do not know, because the Qur'ān has not given us any information about it. In any case, there is no need to explore it further because we accept it as the sum of this fact.

This group of *jinn* say that such eavesdropping, to which they refer by '*reaching up to heaven*', was no longer possible. When they tried it, they found the way blocked by mighty guards and shooting stars aimed at them, indeed killing them. They declare that they know nothing about the prospect determined for mankind: "*We do not know if this bodes evil for those who live on earth, or if their Lord intends to guide them to what is right.*" (Verse 10) They, thus, clearly declare that they have no access to such information because it is part of God's own knowledge. When the very source the soothsayers claim to receive their very special information from declares that it has no such knowledge, then nothing more can be said. All soothsaying and astrology are thus shown to be false. The world beyond belongs to God who alone knows it all. No one can dare claim any special knowledge of it or predict it. The Qur'ān declares that the human mind must remain free of any such delusion. It rids mankind of all such superstitions.

Who or what are those mighty guards? Where do they stand? How do they aim the shooting stars at the devils trying to eavesdrop? Neither the Qur'ān nor the *Ḥadīth* tells us anything of these questions. We do not have any other source to rely on. Had it been useful for us to learn any details of this, God would have given us them. Since He has chosen not to do so, it is futile for us to try anything in this regard. It does not add anything to our lives or to our useful knowledge.

Nor is there any use objecting to this information, or arguing that shooting stars function according to a particular celestial order that remained in operation before and after the Prophet's message, or by adding that astronomers are still trying to explain how this system works. Whatever theories astronomers and scientists come up with, and whether these are correct or not, are outside our discussion here. The system does not preclude that these shooting stars aim at devils as they try to eavesdrop, or that they move in accordance with God's will that gave them their operational system, whether they are meant to hit anyone or not.

Others view all this discussion as figurative, giving us an abstraction of how God preserves His message from being mixed up with falsehood. They maintain that such statements should not be taken at face value. The reason they take this line is that they approach the Qur'ān with preconceived ideas that they acquire from other sources and try to give the Qur'ān an interpretation that fits such preconceptions. Thus, they view the angels as a symbol of goodness and obedience to God, Satan and his group as a symbol of evil and disobedience, and the shooting stars as a symbol of the power of preservation and protection. This is because their notions, which they conceive before they look at the Qur'ān, tell them that neither the angels, devils nor *jinn* could have any physical existence, or take any tangible action, or leave any practical effect. Where do they get all this from? How do they arrive at such preconceptions to which they subject Qur'ānic and *Ḥadīth* statements?

The proper approach to understanding the Qur'ān is to abandon all preconceptions, whether emotional, intellectual or logical, and to formulate our concepts on the basis of the Qur'ān's presentation of the truth about the universe. In other words, the Qur'ān and *Ḥadīth* must be taken only in light of the Qur'ān. We must not try to negate or interpret anything stated in the Qur'ān, or to prove anything the Qur'ān negates or considers invalid. On anything else the Qur'ān neither proves nor negates, we may judge according to logic and experience.

We naturally say this to people who believe in the Qur'ān, yet try to interpret its statements according to their own preconceived ideas of

how things in the universe must be.[4] Those, on the other hand, who do not believe in the Qur'ān, yet arbitrarily try to negate certain facts because science has not proven them, make laughable claims. Science has not yet fathomed the secrets of things that are available to scientists who use them in their research. This lack of knowledge does not negate their existence. Moreover, large numbers of scientists began to believe in the unknown on the same lines as the advocates of religion, or at least these scientists do not deny what they do not know. Pursuing their scientific work, they have found themselves facing some unknowns, when they had thought these to be totally known to man. Hence, they have become humble, unprepared to make wild claims about that which they do not know. They do not disregard the unknown as some of those who deny religion altogether do, claiming that they monopolize scientific thinking.

To Tread the Unknown

The universe around us is full of secrets, spirits and forces. This *sūrah*, like many others, gives us a glimpse of some truths in the universe to help us formulate a proper concept of it and what it contains of forces and lives that carry on around us as also interact with us and with human life in general. This is the concept that distinguishes us, Muslims, putting us in the right position, leaning neither to delusion and superstition, nor to arrogance and insupportable claims. It is a concept based on the Qur'ān and *Ḥadīth*. It is to these two that a Muslim refers all theories and interpretations.

The human mind is given a certain area where man can explore the unknown; indeed Islam directs man to do so, pressurizing him into such action. However, beyond this scope lies a wide area that the human mind cannot access, and to which it does not need such access. It is of

4. I do not absolve myself of falling into this trap in my previous works and in the early volumes of this work. I hope to rectify this in the second edition of this book. What I am stating here is what I believe to be the truth in the light of God's guidance.

Needless to say, the author is here referring to the first Arabic edition of these volumes, which was much shorter and less detailed than the second. This English translation is based on the second edition. – Editor's note.

no use to us in the fulfilment of the task assigned to us, namely, building human life on earth. Hence, man has not been given such access; it is outside of his remit. Whatever he needs to know of this unknown realm in order to understand his own position in relation to the universe and what is around him has been explained to him by God, in terms that he can understand. Aspects of this area that we have been given information about include the angels, the devils, the spirit, our origin and our ultimate destination.

Those who follow divine guidance accept what God has revealed to them of these aspects in His book and through His messengers. They benefit by this feeling of God's majesty and His wisdom with regard to creation. They also learn man's position in relation to such forces and spirits. They dedicate themselves to making whatever scientific discoveries they can manage within the area of the universe made available to man. They utilize their discoveries in the all important task assigned to them, which is building sound human life on the basis of divine guidance, seeking God's acceptance and endeavouring to rise to the sublime level man can achieve.

Others who turn their backs on divine guidance are split into two large groups. One continues to strive, with their own finite minds, to understand the infinite, and to learn the hidden truth from sources other than God's revelations. Among these have been some philosophers who tried to explain the universe and the mutual bonds between its different parts. They made fatal errors, just like children who try to climb a very high mountain with no known summit. They are trying to solve the essential secret of the universe when they have not yet learnt the alphabet! Prominent philosophers among them even arrived at ludicrous concepts. When these are compared to the consistent and lucid concept Islam presents, they appear absurd, full of errors and ironies. They are too naïve to explain the universe, great as it certainly is. I make no exception here in respect of the great Greek philosophers of old, or the Muslim philosophers who toed their line, or of contemporary philosophers.

The other large group recognizes the futility of such attempts and limits itself and its efforts to experimental and applied scientific research. It makes no attempt to penetrate into the unknown, where it knows it cannot go. Scientists in this group refuse to accept God's guidance

on this because they do not recognize God. This group was at its most extreme during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but began in the early years of the twentieth century to wake up and reconsider its extremism. What produced its wake-up call was the transformation of matter in the hands of scientists to radiation, which is of 'unknown nature' and subject to almost unknown law.

By contrast, Islam remained at its vantage point of certainty, giving mankind a measure of the unknown that is good and beneficial for them, allowing them to dedicate themselves to work for the elevation of human life. It gives them the scope in which their minds can work in safety and security. It guides them to what is best in respect of what is known and what remains unknown.

The *Jinn* Community

The *jinn* then describe their own situation and their attitude towards divine guidance. We understand from this that they have a similar nature to mankind, with the dual propensity to either believe or go astray. This group who believed now speak of their faith and what fate awaits the follower of either course:

> *Some among us are righteous and others less so: we follow widely divergent paths. We know that we can never elude God on earth, and we can never elude Him by flight. When we heard the guidance, we came to believe in it. Whoever believes in his Lord need never fear loss or injustice. Some of us submit to Him and others are unfair. Those who submit to God are the ones who have endeavoured to attain what is right. But those who are unfair will be the fuel of hellfire.* (Verses 11–15)

The statement that some of them are righteous and some less so, that some submit to God and others refuse to do so, clearly indicates their dual capacity, except that is for those of them who were determined to be unfair permanently, i.e. Satan and his group. This is a very important statement as it corrects our general perception of these creatures. Many of us, including scholars, tend to think that the *jinn* represent evil, that

their nature is decidedly bad, while man is the only creature capable of good or evil. It is time we corrected this ill-founded idea.

This group of *jinn* says: "*Some among us are righteous and others less so.*" (Verse 11) They describe their general situation: "*We follow widely divergent paths.*" (Verse 11) This means that each group takes a totally different course from the other, and the two paths do not meet. They go on to explain their own beliefs after they have accepted the divine faith: "*We know that we can never elude God on earth, and we can never elude Him by flight.*" (Verse 12) They know God's power. They know they can never escape from Him or what He wills for them. They cannot elude Him on earth nor can they elude Him by running away from earth. They thus acknowledge their weakness before the Creator. They know that everything in the universe is subject to His absolute power.

It is these very creatures, the *jinn*, to whom some humans appeal for support and protection, and who they call upon for help. They are the ones whom the unbelievers claimed to have a marriage relation with God. Yet here they acknowledge their own weakness and God's might. They, thus, correct their own people's and the unbelievers' notion about the only power to which no other can stand.

Although they had already stated their belief, they repeat this here in the context of the *jinn*'s differing attitudes to divine guidance: "*When we heard the guidance, we came to believe in it.*" (Verse 13) This is what everyone who hears divine guidance should do. What they heard was the Qur'ān, but here they call it '*the guidance*', confirming its nature and outcome. They follow this by a statement confirming their absolute trust in God: "*Whoever believes in his Lord need never fear loss or injustice.*" (Verse 13) They have complete trust in God's justice and power. They know the nature of faith. God is fair and He will never fail to give a believer his fair reward. He never burdens him with what he cannot bear. He will protect believers against loss and injustice. Who can inflict loss on a believer or overburden him when he is under God's care, enjoying His protection? Some believers may be deprived of some of life's riches, but this is not what is meant by '*loss*'. Such losses are easily compensated for to ensure fairness. A believer may also suffer harm caused him by some earthly forces, but this is not the '*injustice*' the Qur'ānic verse refers to. God will always give the believer an increase of energy to be able

to tolerate the pain and channel it in a positive way so as to strengthen him. His ties with his Lord will ease the hardship, turning it to what is good for him both in this life and in the life to come.

A believer is thus reassured that he will suffer neither loss nor injustice. This reassurance gives him great confidence throughout times of ease. He is free of worry and fear. When things change and he suffers adversity, he neither panics nor feels overwhelmed. He considers such hardship and misfortune to be a trial God wants him to go through. He bears such adversity with patience. Indeed, he is rewarded for his patience. Furthermore, he hopes that God will relieve this adversity and that again he will be rewarded. Hence, whether the situation be one of ease or adversity, he does not fear or experience either loss or unfairness. This group of *jinn* give a true description of this truth.

The *jinn* now refer to their views about guidance and error and the requital for each: "*Some of us submit to Him and others are unfair. Those who submit to God are the ones who have endeavoured to attain what is right. But those who are unfair will be the fuel of hellfire.*" (Verses 14–15) The *jinn* thus contrast those who are unfair with those who submit themselves to God, or are Muslims. This is a fine touch. A Muslim who submits himself to God is always fair and righteous.

"*Those who submit to God are the ones who have endeavoured to attain what is right.*" (Verse 14) The way this sentence is phrased suggests that to be guided to Islam a person needs to be very careful and meticulous in seeking proper guidance. It also implies a conscious choice of what is right, based on careful study and clear vision. This does not, however, come about by coincidence, or by following the crowd, as it were! It means that these people arrived at what is right when they chose Islam and submitted themselves to God. "*But those who are unfair will be the fuel of hellfire.*" (Verse 15) Their fate is settled. They will become the fuel of hell, and it will rage even more fiercely when they are cast into it.

This confirms that the *jinn* are also punished in hell. It similarly implies that the good among them are destined for heaven. The Qur'ānic text also bears this out and it is from the Qur'ān that we derive our beliefs. No one, then, can say anything that is not based on the Qur'ān, particularly about the nature of the *jinn*, hell and heaven. Whatever else is said in this regard is futile.

What applies to the *jinn*, as they explained it to their people, also applies to humans. They have been informed of this through revelation recited to them by the Prophet.

Different Types of Trial

Up to this point, the *sūrah* has quoted what the *jinn* said about themselves. Now, it summarizes what they said about what God does with those who follow the right course, obeying His commands. In doing so, the Qur'ān reports their ideas without actually quoting their precise words:

> *Had they established themselves on the right way, We would have given them abundant water to drink, so as to test them by this means. Anyone who turns away from his Lord's revelation will be made to endure uphill suffering.* (Verses 16–17)

God Almighty confirms what the *jinn* said to the effect that had people maintained following the right way, or had those who were unfair followed the right way, He would have given them water in plenty, which would have ensured their prosperity. All this would be "*so as to test them by this means.*" (Verse 17) Such a trial establishes whether they are grateful or not.

This change of style, from quoting direct speech to reporting it, enhances the effect because it attributes the message and the promise it gives to God Almighty. Such changes are frequent in the Qur'ān. It reinforces the meaning and draws attention to it.

These two verses include several facts related to Islamic beliefs, how we look at events and how they interrelate. The first of these is the direct relation between following the straight path leading to God, by nations and communities, and their enjoying prosperity and provisions in plenty. The most essential requirement of such prosperity is abundant water. All life depends on water. This is true even in our own times when industry has acquired much greater importance, and agriculture is no longer the only source of plentiful provisions and prosperity. Water still remains as important as ever for a flourishing civilization.

That prosperity and security depend on following the right way and maintaining it with resolve is certainly true. The Arabs were desert people living in total poverty. When they followed the right way with strong resolve, the world opened up to them providing plentiful water and provisions. Then they deviated from that way, and all the good things in life were taken away from them. They will continue to live a life of stress and poverty until they regain the right way and follow it.[5] Only then will God's promise be fulfilled to them.

There are certainly communities that turn away from the line God wants people to follow in this life, yet they enjoy affluence. However, when we look at the life they lead we find that they suffer from other ills that detract from their humanity, security or man's dignity and freedom. Thus their riches do not provide them with real prosperity. On the contrary, life in such societies becomes a curse for man depriving him of dignity, security and proper morality.

The second fact that the verses above establish is that prosperity is a means of trial God sets for His creatures: "*We test you all with evil and good by way of trial.*" (21: 35) Indeed, maintaining the right way in times of plenty and prosperity, giving due thanks for God's favours and using them for good purposes is, contrary to what appears at first sight, more difficult than patience in adversity. Many are those who show courage and perseverance when things go against them. They rally and put in sustained efforts to overcome such adversity. They more readily remember God, pray to Him and seek His help, realizing that only He can bring them through their troubles. When people are prosperous, enjoying a life of plenty, however, they tend to forget God and be distracted. The element of resistance is no longer needed. There is every opportunity for arrogance, treating God's blessings as merited dues. This then opens the way for Satan and his machinations.

A trial with prosperity requires constant alertness to resist such temptation, because the blessings of affluence often lead to transgression,

5. It may be suggested that oil has given Arabs, or many of them at least, wealth and comfortable living. Oil provides only temporary means of affluence. Besides, it brought the Arabs much stress and misery, with the mighty powers of the world imposing a state of almost total powerlessness on Arab countries. Today, for the Arabs to regain control of their own destiny seems an extremely remote possibility for most educated Arabs. – Editor's note.

ingratitude, arrogance, injustice, depriving other people of their rights and also disrespecting sanctities. God may favour some people with beauty, but this blessing often leads to arrogance and sin. He may give them intelligence, yet again this blessing may lead to conceit, disrespect of others and disregard for values and standards. Almost every blessing and favour God grants us involves some temptation that takes the person away from the right path. Only those who always remember God and, who as a result, enjoy His protection are excepted.

When a trial of prosperity leads to moving away from God's path, this makes God's punishment inevitable. The Qur'ānic verse mentions a particular quality of such punishment: "*Anyone who turns away from his Lord's revelation will be made to endure uphill suffering.*" (Verse 17) This gives a sense of increased difficulty, because whoever goes uphill finds the going harder as he climbs higher. The Qur'ān often refers to such hardship as going uphill. Other examples include: "*Whomever God wills to guide, He makes his bosom open wide with willingness towards self-surrender (to Him); and whomever He wills to let go astray, He causes his bosom to be tight and constricted, as if he were climbing up into the skies.*" (6: 125) "*I will constrain him to endure a painful uphill climb.*" (74: 17) This is a well-known fact. The contrast between a trial of affluence and hard punishment in requital is, thus, abundantly clear.

None Other Than God

The next verse may represent another quotation from the *jinn*, or it may be a direct statement made by God:

> *Places of worship are for God alone; therefore, do not invoke anyone other than God.* (Verse 18)

In both cases it makes clear that worship, and places of worship, which is expressed in the Arabic text in the form of prostration, must be devoted to God alone. That is where God's oneness is strictly observed, leaving no room whatsoever for anyone else, be that a person, a value or an idea. The whole atmosphere must be dedicated to the pure worship of God alone. Invoking someone other than God may take the form of

worshipping that someone, appealing to him, or even directing one's thoughts and feelings towards him instead of God.

If we take the verse to be a statement made by the *jinn*, it serves as a reconfirmation of their earlier pledge: "*We shall never associate partners with our Lord.*" (Verse 2) This is repeated at the mention of places of worship and prostration before God. If we take it as a statement by God, it serves as a directive that fits with what the *jinn* said about their belief in God's oneness. The same applies to the verse that follows:

> *Yet when God's servant stood up to pray to Him, they pressed in on him in multitude.* (Verse 19)

The verse describes how the unbelievers pressed upon this servant of God when he stood to invoke and pray to Him. If we treat this verse as quoting the *jinn*'s statement, then they are telling us about what the Arab unbelievers did when they gathered in groups around the Prophet as he stood up to pray or as he recited the Qur'ān. This is referred to in an earlier *sūrah* in this volume: "*What is wrong with the unbelievers, that they run confusedly before you, from the right and the left, in crowds?*" (70: 36–37) They listen with amazement, yet they do not respond. Alternatively, the expression, '*they pressed on him in multitude,*' means that they tried to inflict harm on him but God protected him, as repeatedly happened. In this case, the *jinn* are reporting this event to their people, describing how singular the Arab unbelievers' attitude was.

If we take the verse as a statement made by God, then it tells us about this group of *jinn*'s reaction when they listened to the Qur'ān. They were totally amazed, pressing on the Prophet, close to each other. This is perhaps more probable as it fits with the feelings of surprise, amazement and alarm that are clearly apparent in the *jinn*'s account.

Both *Jinn* and Human

Having completed its account of what the *jinn* said about the Qur'ān, and their total amazement at its discourse, the *sūrah* now addresses the Prophet in a decisive tone, requiring him to deliver his message and to make it clear that once he has done so, he has no say in what happens

afterwards. He is to make clear that he has no knowledge whatsoever of the world beyond, or of how people fare. This address carries an overtone of sorrow and sadness that particularly suits its seriousness and decisive manner:

> *Say: 'I invoke my Lord alone, and I associate no partners with Him.' Say: 'It is not in my power to cause you harm or to set you on the right course.' Say: 'No one can ever protect me from God, nor can I ever find a place to hide from Him. My task is only to deliver what I receive from God and His messages.' Whoever disobeys God and His Messenger will have the fire of hell, where they will abide for ever. When they see what they have been promised, they will realize who has the lesser help and is smaller in number. Say: 'I do not know whether that which you have been promised is imminent, or whether my Lord has set for it a distant term. He alone knows that which is beyond the reach of human perception, and He does not disclose His secrets to anyone except to a messenger whom He has been pleased to choose. He then sends watchers to walk before and behind him, to know that they have delivered their Lord's messages. He has full knowledge of all they have. He takes count of everything.'* (Verses 20–28)

You, Muḥammad! Say it to all people: "*I invoke my Lord alone, and I associate no partners with Him.*" (Verse 20) Coming after the *jinn*'s statement, "*We shall never associate partners with our Lord,*" this declaration acquires special effect. It is the same words, declared by *jinn* and humans. These unbelievers who do not share in it break away from all worlds.

No Help from Anyone

"*Say: It is not in my power to cause you harm or to set you on the right course.*" (Verse 21) The Prophet is commanded to disclaim any of God's qualities and attributes. It is God alone who must be worshipped, without partners, and He alone who can cause harm and bring benefit. The verse contrasts harm with being '*on the right course*,' which means following divine guidance. This was clearly expressed by the *jinn* earlier:

"*We do not know if this bodes evil for those who live on earth, or if their Lord intends to guide them to what is right.*" (Verse 10) Thus, the two statements have the same drift and are almost identical in their wording. This is deliberate. It is also a frequently used structure in the Qur'ān where we always see such complementarity between a story and the Qur'ānic comments on events.

Thus the *jinn*, who are often thought to be able to cause harm and bring about benefit, and the Prophet disclaim any such ability. It all belongs to God alone. The divine faith makes this absolutely clear, with no possibility for confusion.

"*Say: No one can ever protect me from God, nor can I ever find a place to hide from Him. My task is only to deliver what I receive from God and His messages.*" (Verses 22–23) This is indeed frightening. It fills our hearts with the seriousness of advocating the divine message. The Prophet is commanded to declare this great truth stating that he himself has neither protection nor hiding place unless he discharges his task, fulfils his trust and delivers his message. This is his only safe resort. The message itself does not belong to him; his only task is to deliver it, which he must fulfil. It is required of him by God Himself, and unless he meets this requirement, he will have nowhere to go and no help from anyone.

How serious! How frightening! Advocating God's message is not something one volunteers to do; it is a serious assignment that must be fulfilled, because it is given by God Almighty. Its motive is not the pleasure one finds in presenting guidance and goodness to people; it is a command given from on high which cannot be shirked. Nor can one show any hesitation in the matter.

"*Whoever disobeys God and His Messenger will have the fire of hell, where they will abide for ever. When they see what they have been promised, they will realize who has the lesser help and is smaller in number.*" (Verses 23–24) There is a warning here, both implicit and explicit, given to everyone who receives this order and disobeys it. If the unbelievers are content with their power and numbers, comparing their strength to that of Muḥammad and his few followers, they will come to know when they see what they have been promised, either in this life or in the life to come, which of the two parties is weaker and will end up the loser. Again, we note how this comment echoes the earlier one made by the

jinn: "*We do not know if this bodes evil for those who live on earth, or if their Lord intends to guide them to what is right.*" (Verse 10)

Limited Knowledge

The Prophet is also commanded to disclaim any knowledge of the world beyond human perception: "*Say: I do not know whether that which you have been promised is imminent, or whether my Lord has set for it a distant term.*" (Verse 25)

In summary, then, this message does not belong to the Prophet; he has no say in it other than to deliver it as he is commanded. Only this will bring him safety. Likewise, the punishment the unbelievers are threatened with also belongs to God and the Prophet has no say in it, nor does he know when it will take place. It may be close at hand or it may be deferred by God to a time of His own choosing. This applies to punishment both in this life and in the life to come. All this is known only to God. The Prophet has no say here whatsoever, not even knowing its timing. It is to God that such knowledge of the world beyond belongs: "*He alone knows that which is beyond the reach of human perception, and He does not disclose His secrets to anyone.*" (Verse 26) The Prophet has neither title nor position, other than that of being God's servant. This is his title and his highest position. The Islamic concept is thus stated in all clarity, free of any confusion. The Prophet is given the order to state his position and he does so without hesitation: "*Say: I do not know whether that which you have been promised is imminent, or whether my Lord has set for it a distant term. He alone knows that which is beyond the reach of human perception, and He does not disclose His secrets to anyone.*" (Verses 25–26)

There is only one exception. God may inform His messengers of something that belongs to this world beyond, within the limits that help them to deliver His message to people. Indeed, all that He reveals to them is part of His knowledge which He imparts to them at a certain point in time and within certain limits. He observes them and looks after them as they deliver His messages. The Prophet is commanded here to declare this exception in a very serious way: "*except to a messenger whom He has been pleased to choose. He then sends watchers to walk before and behind him, to know that they have delivered their Lord's messages. He*

has full knowledge of all they have. He takes count of everything." (Verses 27–28) Those messengers whom God chooses to deliver His message are given some information that belongs to the world beyond human perception. They are, for example, given revelation, its subject matter, method, the angels imparting it, its source and its preservation in the guarded tablet, as well as all that is related to what their messages contain. Prior to giving them such information, it was all there, in the realm that lies beyond human perception.

At the same time, these messengers are surrounded by watchers and guards to protect them. They protect them from Satan's whispers and attempts to derail their efforts, from personal promptings and aspirations, from human weaknesses, forgetfulness, deviation and all other shortcomings that may affect a messenger and disrupt his work. The notion is also a frightening one, "*He then sends watchers to walk before and behind him.*" (Verse 27) This describes the careful, complete and permanent monitoring of the messenger as he goes about his great task, delivering his message. This monitoring has a purpose: "*to know that they have delivered their Lord's messages.*" (Verse 28) God certainly knows this. What is meant here is that the messengers fulfil their assignments and that this brings about their fulfilment in the practical world.

"*He has full knowledge of all they have.*" (Verse 28) Everything in their hearts and lives, everything around them is known to Him; nothing escapes. "*He takes count of everything.*" (Verse 28) This is not though limited to just the messengers; it applies to all things: they are all counted up, which signifies the most accurate type of knowledge.

Just imagine this situation: God's Messenger is surrounded by guards and watchers, with God's knowledge already having counted all he has and all that is around him. He receives the command as a soldier who has no option but to comply. He goes about his task but he is not left to himself, to suffer from his own weaknesses or desires. What he likes or dislikes is not allowed to affect him. The whole matter is one of complete seriousness and careful monitoring. He knows all this and moves along his way, turning neither here nor there, because he knows that he is constantly watched by the most alert of guards. It is a situation that draws much sympathy for God's Messenger. It also fills us with awe when we consider the seriousness of it all.

This very awesome note brings the *sūrah* to its conclusion. It began with a feeling of awe and amazement that is clearly noticeable in the long discourse about the *jinn*. In no more than 28 verses, the *sūrah* outlines a large number of truths that are part of the Islamic faith. They are essential in the formulation of the clear and balanced vision a Muslim must have, leaning towards no extreme. It keeps all doors to knowledge open, leaving no room for delusion or superstition.

Especially true is the statement delivered by the group of *jinn* that listened to the Qur'ān: "*We have heard a wondrous discourse, giving guidance to what is sagacious, and we have come to believe in it.*" (Verses 1–2)

SŪRAH 73

Al-Muzzammil

(The Enfolded One)

Prologue

A report in connection with the revelation of this *sūrah* suggests that the Quraysh elders held a meeting in Dār al-Nadwah, a place where they normally gathered, in order to discuss any momentous event. This time they were discussing their strategy as regards the Prophet and the message he advocated. When the Prophet heard of this meeting, he was distressed. He wrapped himself in his clothes, covered himself and went to sleep. The Angel Gabriel then brought him the first passage of this *sūrah*, comprising 19 verses, with the command to stay up in worship at night. Its final part, consisting of Verse 20, was delayed for a full year, during which the Prophet and some of his Companions attended to their night worship until their legs were swollen from the effort. Only then was the *sūrah*'s second part revealed reducing their burden.

Another report also tells of the occasion of this *sūrah*'s revelation, but it also applies to the revelation of the next *sūrah*, Wrapped in Cloak, as we will mention in our discussion there, God willing. In summary, this report mentions that three years before the start of his message, the Prophet used to go to a cave in Mount Ḥirā', about two miles from Makkah, where he spent the month of Ramaḍān in worship. In this way, his family were not far from him, enabling him to stay in the cave for the whole month. Here, he would feed any poor person who happened

to pass by, and spend the rest of his time in worship and contemplation. His thoughts would go to the universe and its amazing scenes, suggesting that it is the creation of a great power. He was unhappy with the flimsy beliefs of his people who were idolaters. Yet he had no clear vision or thoughts. No consistent line presented itself to him.

This seclusion was an aspect of how God guided him, indeed, prepared him, for the great task which was later to be assigned him. He was alone, away from the hassle of life and its preoccupations. He just wanted to broaden his scope, feel the beauty of the universe and try to understand what message it imparts to a clear mind. Whoever is chosen to carry out the task of influencing and changing the direction of humanity needs such seclusion where he is free from life's minor concerns and preoccupations. He certainly needs a period of contemplation when he can look at the open universe and try to understand the truth it signifies. When a person is attending to life's concerns, he finds himself in a familiar environment, which he will complacently accept. He does not think of changing it. It is only moving away from the immediate environment and its concerns that gives the soul its ability to discern what is not readily apparent. Seclusion provides the training ground to appreciate the world around us, without reference to prevailing concepts.

This is, then, what God designed for Muḥammad as He prepared him to shoulder the greatest trust. It would be his task to change the direction of human life and thus the world. For three years before the start of his mission, God sent the Prophet into seclusion for one month every year.

When God willed to bestow this great aspect of His grace on the dwellers of the earth, the Angel Gabriel went to the Prophet Muḥammad in the cave at Ḥirā'. The Prophet gives this report about what then took place:

> The Prophet said: "While I was asleep he came to me carrying a case of a very rich material in which there was a book. He said: 'Read.' I replied: 'I am not a reader.' He pressed me so hard that I felt that I was about to die. Then he released me and said, 'Read.' I asked: 'What shall I read?' (I said this only out of fear that he

might repeat what he had done to me before.) He said: 'Read: in the name of Your Lord Who created. It is He Who created man from a clinging cell mass . Read! Your Lord is the Most Bounteous, Who has taught the use of the pen. He has taught man what he did not know.' (96: 1–5) I read it. He stopped. Then he left me and went away. I woke up feeling that it was actually written in my heart."

The Prophet went on to say: "When I was halfway up the mountain, I heard a voice coming from the heavens saying: 'Muḥammad, you are the Messenger of God and I am Gabriel.' I raised my head up to the sky and I saw Gabriel in the image of a man with his feet next to one another up on the horizon. He said again: 'Muḥammad, you are the Messenger of God and I am Gabriel.' I stood in my place looking up at him; this distracted me from my intention. I was standing there unable to move. I tried to turn my face away from him and to look up at the sky, but wherever I looked I saw him in front of me. I stood still, moving neither forward nor backward. Khadījah sent her messengers looking for me and I remained standing in my place all the while until they went back to her. He then left me and I went back to my family. When I reached home I sat next to Khadījah, leaning on her. She said: 'Where have you been? I sent people after you and they went to the outskirts of Makkah looking for you.' I told her of what happened, and she said: 'Rejoice! By God, I was certain that God would bring you only what is good. I certainly hope that you are the Prophet of this nation.'[1]

The revelation stopped for a while, and then when the Prophet went again to the mountain, he looked up and saw the Angel Gabriel. He was overwhelmed with such a shudder that he fell to the ground. He then hurriedly went home, saying to his family: 'Cover me! Wrap me.' They did so. He continued to shiver, so great was his fear. Then Gabriel called him: "*You enfolded one!*" (Verse 1) It is also reported that Gabriel

1. Adil Salahi (2002), *Muhammad: Man and Prophet*, Leicester, The Islamic Foundation, pp. 67–72.

called him: "*You wrapped in your cloak.*" (74: 1) God knows best which of these statements was expressed.

Regardless of whether the first or the second report about this *sūrah*'s revelation is correct, the Prophet learnt that from now on he would only have a little sleep. He had a heavy duty to shoulder, requiring a long struggle. He was always to be on the alert, ready to work hard with little or no rest. The Prophet was told to stay up, and he did, for more than 20 years. He never slackened, but devoted himself completely to his message, attending to its requirements. He shouldered his very heavy burden without complaint. It was the burden of the greatest trust of all, the divine faith and the hard struggle it required.

His first area of struggle was the human mind burdened as it was with a great heap of erroneous concepts, wrong ideas and shackled with personal desires and earthly attractions. When he had purged the minds of some of his Companions of this heavy burden, another battle in a different field beckoned. In fact, this was to culminate in a series of battles against the enemies of the divine message, who marshalled their forces to crush the new message and supplant its tree before it could establish roots and send out its branches. He had hardly finished with these battles in the Arabian Peninsula when the Byzantine Empire began to prepare itself to deal a heavy defeat against this fledgling Islamic state in Arabia.

Yet throughout this long struggle, the first battle for the human mind was not over. This is a permanent battle against Satan who does not stop even for a moment in his attempts to lure people. Regardless, the Prophet continued to nurture God's message, living in poverty when great riches were available to him, putting in strenuous efforts whilst his Companions enjoyed comfort and security. His was a continuous and hard struggle, one that required patience, perseverance, night worship, recitation of the Qur'ān and the permanent pursuit of God's pleasure. It was a full implementation of divine orders: "*You enfolded one! Stand in prayer at night, all but a small part of it, half of it, or a little less, or add to it. Recite the Qur'ān calmly and distinctly. We shall bestow on you a weighty message. The night hours are strongest of tread and most upright of speech. During the day you have a long chain of things to attend to. Therefore, remember your Lord's name and devote yourself wholeheartedly*

to Him. He is the Lord of the east and the west. There is no deity other than Him. Take Him for your guardian. Endure with patience what people may say, and leave their company with noble dignity." (Verses 1–10) Thus did Muḥammad stand in prayer, and thus did he continue to fight a raging battle for over 20 years. He let nothing distract him from this. From the moment he heard the divine call assigning his duty to him he remained focused on his task. May God reward him with His best reward.

The first half of the *sūrah* maintains the same rhythm, and almost the same rhyme, with an 'l' followed by a long 'a', throughout. It gives the *sūrah* a relaxed but courtly beat, one that suits its majestic command, the seriousness of the duty and the successive and momentous images the *sūrah* portrays. These include the weighty message and the frightening warning: "*Leave to Me those who deny the truth and enjoy the comforts of this life. Bear with them for a little while. We have heavy fetters and a blazing fire, food that chokes and painful suffering.*" (Verses 11–13) There are also the awesome images drawn from the great universe and from the depths of the human soul: "*on the day when the earth and the mountains will shake, and the mountains will crumble into heaps of shifting sand.*" (Verse 14) "*How will you, if you continue to disbelieve, guard yourselves against a day that will turn children's hair grey? That is the day when the skies shall be rent asunder. God's promise will certainly be fulfilled.*" (Verses 17–18)

The long verse that comes at the end of the *sūrah* was revealed a whole year later, during which time the Prophet and some of those who followed him maintained night worship for much of the night, every night. This was an aspect of their preparation for the role God wanted them to play. When this year had passed, the order of night worship was relaxed, but this relaxation was coupled with the reassurance that it was God's choice for them, according to His knowledge and wisdom, taking into account the duties He had assigned to them. This verse runs in a different style: it is long, with a varied, calm and steady lilt. The ending, with its 'm' preceded by a long 'e', perfectly suits this steady calmness.

In its two parts, the *sūrah* portrays a stage of the Islamic message, beginning with the address from on high outlining the heavy assignment. It describes the preparation for this heavy duty by night worship, constant prayer, recitation of the Qur'ān, and glorifying God, relying

on Him alone, enduring hardship with forbearance, withdrawing with dignity from the unbelievers and leaving them to God Almighty, to whom the message belongs and who conducts the battle. The *sūrah* ends with a kindly touch, relieving some of the burden and lightening the duty, with a directive to attend to voluntary tasks that earn His reward. Finally, it holds out the prospect of God granting forgiveness and bestowing grace: "*God is Much Forgiving, Ever Merciful.*" (Verse 20) The *sūrah* as a whole represents a stage in the noble efforts made by that chosen community to return erring humanity to its Lord, enduring all the hardship involved and looking for no gain in this life.

Al-Muzzammil
(The Enfolded One)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

You enfolded one! (1)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلْمُزَّمِّلُ ١

Stand in prayer at night, all but a small part of it, (2)

قُمِ ٱلَّيْلَ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا ٢

half of it, or a little less, (3)

نِّصْفَهُۥٓ أَوِ ٱنقُصْ مِنْهُ قَلِيلًا ٣

or add to it. Recite the Qur'ān calmly and distinctly. (4)

أَوْ زِدْ عَلَيْهِ وَرَتِّلِ ٱلْقُرْءَانَ تَرْتِيلًا ٤

We shall bestow on you a weighty message. (5)

إِنَّا سَنُلْقِى عَلَيْكَ قَوْلًا ثَقِيلًا ٥

The night hours are strongest of tread and most upright of speech. (6)

إِنَّ نَاشِئَةَ ٱلَّيْلِ هِىَ أَشَدُّ وَطْـًٔا وَأَقْوَمُ قِيلًا ٦

During the day you have a long chain of things to attend to. (7)

إِنَّ لَكَ فِى ٱلنَّهَارِ سَبْحًا طَوِيلًا ٧

Therefore, remember your Lord's name and devote yourself wholeheartedly to Him. (8)

وَٱذْكُرِ ٱسْمَ رَبِّكَ وَتَبَتَّلْ إِلَيْهِ تَبْتِيلًا ٨

He is the Lord of the east and the west. There is no deity other than Him. Take Him for your guardian. (9)

رَّبُّ ٱلۡمَشۡرِقِ وَٱلۡمَغۡرِبِ لَآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ فَٱتَّخِذۡهُ وَكِيلٗا ٩

Endure with patience what people may say, and leave their company with noble dignity. (10)

وَٱصۡبِرۡ عَلَىٰ مَا يَقُولُونَ وَٱهۡجُرۡهُمۡ هَجۡرٗا جَمِيلٗا ١٠

Leave to Me those who deny the truth and enjoy the comforts of this life. Bear with them for a little while. (11)

وَذَرۡنِي وَٱلۡمُكَذِّبِينَ أُوْلِي ٱلنَّعۡمَةِ وَمَهِّلۡهُمۡ قَلِيلًا ١١

We have heavy fetters and a blazing fire, (12)

إِنَّ لَدَيۡنَآ أَنكَالٗا وَجَحِيمٗا ١٢

food that chokes and painful suffering (13)

وَطَعَامٗا ذَا غُصَّةٖ وَعَذَابًا أَلِيمٗا ١٣

on the day when the earth and the mountains will shake, and the mountains will crumble into heaps of shifting sand. (14)

يَوۡمَ تَرۡجُفُ ٱلۡأَرۡضُ وَٱلۡجِبَالُ وَكَانَتِ ٱلۡجِبَالُ كَثِيبٗا مَّهِيلًا ١٤

We have sent you a Messenger to be your witness, just as We sent a messenger to Pharaoh. (15)

إِنَّآ أَرۡسَلۡنَآ إِلَيۡكُمۡ رَسُولٗا شَٰهِدًا عَلَيۡكُمۡ كَمَآ أَرۡسَلۡنَآ إِلَىٰ فِرۡعَوۡنَ رَسُولٗا ١٥

Pharaoh disobeyed the messenger, and so We inflicted on him a severe punishment. (16)

فَعَصَىٰ فِرۡعَوۡنُ ٱلرَّسُولَ فَأَخَذۡنَٰهُ أَخۡذٗا وَبِيلٗا ١٦

How will you, if you continue to disbelieve, guard yourselves against a day that will turn children's hair grey? (17)

فَكَيْفَ تَتَّقُونَ إِن كَفَرْتُمْ يَوْمًا يَجْعَلُ
ٱلْوِلْدَٰنَ شِيبًا ﴿١٧﴾

That is the day when the skies shall be rent asunder. God's promise will certainly be fulfilled. (18)

ٱلسَّمَآءُ مُنفَطِرٌۢ بِهِۦ ۚ كَانَ وَعْدُهُۥ
مَفْعُولًا ﴿١٨﴾

This is but a reminder. Let him who will, take the way to his Lord. (19)

إِنَّ هَٰذِهِۦ تَذْكِرَةٌ ۖ فَمَن شَآءَ ٱتَّخَذَ
إِلَىٰ رَبِّهِۦ سَبِيلًا ﴿١٩﴾

Your Lord knows that you stand in prayer nearly two-thirds of the night, or one-half or a third of it, as do some of your followers. It is God who determines the measure of night and day. He is aware that you will not be able to keep a measure of it, and therefore He turns towards you in His grace. Recite of the Qur'ān as much as may be easy for you. He knows that some of you will be sick, others will go about in the land seeking God's bounty, and others will be fighting for God's cause. Therefore, recite whatever you may do with ease. Attend regularly to prayer, pay your obligatory charity [i.e. *zakāt*], and give God a goodly loan. Whatever good

إِنَّ رَبَّكَ يَعْلَمُ أَنَّكَ تَقُومُ أَدْنَىٰ مِن ثُلُثَىِ ٱلَّيْلِ
وَنِصْفَهُۥ وَثُلُثَهُۥ وَطَآئِفَةٌ مِّنَ ٱلَّذِينَ مَعَكَ ۚ
وَٱللَّهُ يُقَدِّرُ ٱلَّيْلَ وَٱلنَّهَارَ ۚ عَلِمَ أَن لَّن
تُحْصُوهُ فَتَابَ عَلَيْكُمْ ۖ فَٱقْرَءُوا۟ مَا تَيَسَّرَ
مِنَ ٱلْقُرْءَانِ ۚ عَلِمَ أَن سَيَكُونُ مِنكُم
مَّرْضَىٰ ۙ وَءَاخَرُونَ يَضْرِبُونَ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ
يَبْتَغُونَ مِن فَضْلِ ٱللَّهِ ۙ وَءَاخَرُونَ
يُقَٰتِلُونَ فِى سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ ۖ فَٱقْرَءُوا۟ مَا تَيَسَّرَ
مِنْهُ ۚ وَأَقِيمُوا۟ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ وَءَاتُوا۟ ٱلزَّكَوٰةَ
وَأَقْرِضُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ قَرْضًا حَسَنًا ۚ وَمَا تُقَدِّمُوا۟

you may offer on your own behalf, you shall find it with God to be better and richer in reward. Seek God's forgiveness, for God is Much-Forgiving, Ever Merciful. (20)

The One Enfolded

> *You enfolded one! Stand in prayer at night, all but a small part of it, half of it, or a little less, or add to it. Recite the Qur'ān calmly and distinctly. We shall bestow on you a weighty message. The night hours are strongest of tread and most upright of speech. During the day you have a long chain of things to attend to. Therefore, remember your Lord's name and devote yourself wholeheartedly to Him. He is the Lord of the east and the west. There is no deity other than Him. Take Him for your guardian.* (Verses 1–9)

"*You enfolded one! Stand...*" This is a call from on high, given by God Almighty. Stand, for you have a great mission and a heavy burden. Stand, for you need to put in sustained efforts. Stand, for the time of sleep and comfort is over. You need to prepare for the task ahead of you.

This is an awesome command requiring the Prophet to pull himself out from the warmth of his bed in a comfortable home and with a happy family life so as to place himself in the midst of a hard struggle, with different forces pulling him here and there. A man who lives for himself may find comfort and ease, but he lives small and dies small. The noble soul who shoulders such a heavy burden has a different perspective: what has he got to do with sleep, comfort, a warm bed and an easy life? The Prophet realized and accepted this. When his wife, Khadījah, once told him to go to bed and relax, he said to her: "The time for sleep has passed." Yes, indeed. He had nothing more than long nights and a long struggle ahead of him.

"*You enfolded one! Stand in prayer at night, all but a small part of it, half of it, or a little less, or add to it. Recite the Qur'ān calmly and*

distinctly." (Verses 1–4) Such is the preparation for the great task. It uses divine methods, which are guaranteed to succeed. The method is night worship, which on the higher level of remembrance of God takes up more than half the night but less than two-thirds, and on the lower level, but still in complete remembrance of Him, takes one-third of the night. This long time should be spent in prayer and recitation of the Qur'ān, aloud but with calmness and without singing. It is authentically reported that the Prophet prayed his *Witr* in no more than 11 *rak'ahs*, but these took up nearly two-thirds of the night, and he read at length from the Qur'ān.

"Sa'īd ibn Hishām reports that he asked Ibn 'Abbās how the Prophet prayed *Witr*. He said: 'Shall I tell you who of all people knows this best?' He said: 'Yes.' Ibn 'Abbās said: 'Go and ask 'Ā'ishah and then come back and tell me her answer'." Sa'īd continues: "I said to her: 'Mother of the believers, tell me what was the Prophet like in his manners?' She said: 'Do you not read the Qur'ān?' I said I did. She said: 'His manners were as the Qur'ān says.' I was about to leave, but then I thought of the Prophet's night worship, so I said: 'Mother of the believers, tell me how the Prophet offered his night worship.' She said: 'Do you not read the *sūrah* starting with, *You enfolded one!*' I said I did. She said: 'God made night worship obligatory at the opening of the *sūrah*, and the Prophet and his Companions offered night worship until their feet were swollen. God retained the end of that *sūrah* with Himself for 12 months, then the relaxation was given. Thus, night worship became voluntary after it had been obligatory.' I was about to rise, but then I remembered *Witr*, and I said to her: 'Mother of the believers, tell me how the Prophet offered *Witr*.' She said: 'We used to prepare for him his tooth stick and the water for his ablutions. He would rise at night, as God wished, and he would use his tooth stick to brush his teeth, then would perform his ablution. He would offer eight *rak'ahs* without sitting in between until he had completed the eighth *rak'ah*. He would then sit down and glorify God and supplicate, then he would stand before ending his prayer, to offer his ninth *rak'ah*. He would sit glorifying God alone, then supplicating. He would then finish his prayer with *Salām*. He said it aloud so that we would hear it. He then prayed two *rak'ahs* sitting down. Thus he would complete 11 *rak'ahs*. When he was older and put on some weight, he

would pray *Witr* in seven *rak'ahs* and do two *rak'ahs* seated to complete nine. When the Prophet offered some voluntary prayers he liked to keep this up. If something distracted him from night worship, such as sleep or illness, he would offer 12 *rak'ahs* during the day. I know that the Prophet never read the whole of the Qur'ān in one night up to the morning, and I know that he never fasted a complete month other than Ramaḍān'." [Related by Aḥmad and Muslim.][2]

A Heavy Weight to Carry

All these preparations were made so that the Prophet could receive the weighty discourse: "*We shall bestow on you a weighty message.*" (Verse 5) This is a reference to the Qur'ān and the assignment it gives the Prophet. The Qur'ān is not weighty in its phraseology; on the contrary, it is both easy to bear in mind and recite. However, it is weighty in the scales of truth, and profound in its effect on people's hearts: "*Had We brought down this Qur'ān upon a mountain, you would have seen it humble itself and break asunder for fear of God.*" (59: 21) Instead, God sent down the Qur'ān to a man's heart, which received it and was steadier than a mountain.

Receiving such an overflow of light and knowledge and understanding it is certainly a weighty task. Dealing with great universal truths as they are is weighty indeed. Likewise, to be in contact with those on high and with the spirits of animate and inanimate creatures in the manner the Prophet was is also weighty. Moreover, to undertake this mission without hesitation and not to turn away here or there in response to temptation is mightily weighty. All this certainly requires long preparation.

Standing up in night worship when others are asleep, leaving aside the distractions of daily life, being in contact with God, receiving His light and bounty, seeking the pleasure of being alone with Him, reciting the Qur'ān in the deep silence of the night as if it is being bestowed now from on high so as to be echoed by the whole universe, and receiving

2. There are many *aḥādīth* and reports describing the Prophet's night prayer and his *Witr*, which show that the Prophet varied these prayers. For a full discussion, refer to *Zād al-Ma'ād* by Ibn al-Qayyim, in which a chapter is devoted to describing the Prophet's night worship.

inspiration from the Qur'ān and its melody in the quiet of the night... is all part of the preparation. It provides the necessary preparedness to shoulder the weighty task and undertake the sustained and strenuous efforts required of the Prophet and anyone who advocates the message of Islam. It enlightens advocates' hearts along their hard way, protecting them from Satan's whispering and temptations, and guiding their footsteps so that they do not fall into the dark maze that stands adjacent to this shining road.

"*The night hours that are strongest of tread and most upright of speech.*" (Verse 6) The night hours referred to here are those that follow the *Isha* Prayer. This verse describes these hours as '*strongest of tread*', which means more physically exhausting, and '*most upright of speech*', which means better rewarding, [according to Mujāhid]. To overcome the appeal of bed after a long day is exhausting, but it declares the triumph of the spirit in response to God's instructions. Since the person spending these hours in worship prefers to be in contact with God, these hours are most upright of speech, because they give a special taste to God's glorification. They make prayer more enlightening, and supplication more transparent. They fill the heart with light and happiness that may not be felt in day prayers. God, who created man and his heart, knows how it responds, what it takes in, how it opens to callers, and at which times it is more responsive and better prepared.

When God wanted to prepare His servant and Messenger, Muḥammad (peace be upon him), for his weighty message, He chose for him night worship because the night hours are the ones that are strongest of tread, producing the most profound impression, and most upright of speech. God knows that during the day he had to attend to different tasks that took up much of his energy. "*During the day you have a long chain of things to attend to.*" (Verse 7) Let him, then, do whatever he needs to do during the day, putting in whatever effort was necessary. When the night comes, however, he should devote himself to his Lord, offering prayer and glorifying Him: "*Therefore, remember your Lord's name and devote yourself wholeheartedly to Him.*" (Verse 8)

Remembering God's name does not mean repeating His honoured name verbally, counting with a bead of one hundred or a thousand pieces. Rather, this is a heart-felt remembrance along with verbal mention, or

it means prayer and reading the Qur'ān while praying. Wholehearted devotion means concentrating all one's attention on God, addressing one's worship to Him, discarding all thoughts and feelings other than the bond with Him.

The *sūrah* follows this instruction by making it clear that there is none other than God to turn to: "*He is the Lord of the east and the west. There is no deity other than Him. Take Him for your guardian.*" (Verse 9) He is the Lord of all, the One God other than whom there is no deity. To devote oneself to Him is to be with the only truth in the universe, and to place one's trust in Him is to place it in the only power in the universe. Such reliance on Him is the natural result of believing in His oneness and His control of the east and the west, or in other words, His control of the entire universe. The Prophet, who is told to stand in order to carry his heavy burden, needs to devote himself wholeheartedly to God and to rely on Him only. It is from this that he derives the strength necessary to carry his heavy burden along his long way.

Flattened Mountains

God then directs His Messenger to remain content and patient in the face of all opposition and false accusation, telling him to leave those people who so behave to Him to deal with:

> *Endure with patience what people may say, and leave their company with noble dignity. Leave to Me those who deny the truth and enjoy the comforts of this life. Bear with them for a little while. We have heavy fetters and a blazing fire, food that chokes and painful suffering on the day when the earth and the mountains will shake, and the mountains will crumble into heaps of shifting sand. We have sent you a Messenger to be your witness, just as We sent a messenger to Pharaoh. Pharaoh disobeyed the messenger, and so We inflicted on him a severe punishment. How will you, if you continue to disbelieve, guard yourselves against a day that will turn children's hair grey? That is the day when the skies shall be rent asunder. God's promise will certainly be fulfilled.* (Verses 10–18)

If the first report concerning the revelation of this *sūrah*'s opening is correct and that it took place during the early days of the Islamic message, this means that this second passage was revealed later, after the call to Islam went public and began to encounter opposition from those who denied it. Some of these were arrogant in their opposition, speaking ill of the Prophet and the believers. If, on the other hand, the second report is more accurate, then the first part of the *sūrah* was revealed in full when the Prophet was at the receiving end of the unbelievers' determined opposition to his message. Be that as it may, we see that the directive to remain patient comes after the one to attend to night worship and engage in glorifying God. These two instructions are often given together with the aim of reinforcing the advocates of the divine message with the help they need along their long journey. These advocates contend with difficulties both from within themselves and from outside by the opponents of Islam. Both types of difficulty are extremely hard to deal with. Hence, the first directive is to remain patient: "*Endure with patience what people may say*", which may be infuriating. Next comes a similarly magnanimous directive: "*And leave their company with noble dignity.*" (Verse 10) No need for any remonstration, showing anger, friction or hostility. Such was the policy of the Islamic message in Makkah, particularly in the early days. It was only an address to hearts and minds, putting the truth before people in a calm and dignified way.

This policy of leaving the company of arrogant opponents with noble dignity is not easy; it requires patience in addition to remembrance and glorification of God. Patience was enjoined by God on every one of His messengers, time after time, and enjoined on His servants who believed in His messengers. No one can dedicate himself to God's message unless he makes patience his main resort, equipment and armament. Advocacy of the divine message is a hard struggle. It requires striving against one's own weaknesses, distractions, desires, haste and despair, and striving against the opponents of the message, their schemes, plots as well as the harm they may directly seek to inflict on the message and its supporters. It also involves striving against general trends to abandon the divine message and its duties, and to disregard its values while paying lip-service to it. Facing such a struggle, an advocate of Islam can resort to nothing

other than patience. Turning to God and glorifying Him goes hand in hand with patience in almost every situation.

So, the Prophet is instructed to endure with patience whatever is said against his message and to leave with noble dignity the company of those who are so hostile to it, leaving them to God to deal with: "*Leave to Me those who deny the truth and enjoy the comforts of this life. Bear with them for a little while.*" (Verse 11) This is said by none other than the Almighty, who has control of all forces. It is He who says: "*Leave to Me those who deny the truth.*" They are only ordinary people while this threat is issued by the One who originated them and created this vast universe needing for the purpose nothing more than to say, '*Be*'. God is saying here that the message is His own, so those who deny it should be left to Him, while the Prophet should carry on with his task of delivering the message. If they want to persist in their denial, then let them do so, but leave their company with noble dignity. It is God who will take care of them and foil their designs. The Prophet need not think further about them.

The warning is terrifying and stunning. It implies that the Almighty will deal with such petty people. They "*may enjoy the comforts of this life*", but they remain powerless in front of Him, no matter how despotic they may be in this world.

"*Bear with them for a little while.*" (Verse 11) If he were to bear with them for the length of life on earth, this would still only represent '*a little while*', because this life is in God's measure only a day or a part of a day. Indeed, it will seem thus to them when it is over. On the Day of Judgement, they will feel that it was no more than an hour of a day. So, it remains '*a little while*' no matter how long this may be; even if they depart this life in safety, without being punished in this world.

"*We have heavy fetters and a blazing fire, food that chokes and painful suffering.*" (Verses 12–13) All these are fitting requitals for those who enjoy a life of comfort in this world but who continue to deny the divine message. They do not appreciate what they are given; nor do they give due thanks for the comforts they enjoy. Therefore, you, Muḥammad, bear with patience what they say and do, and leave them to Me. We have what they deserve: heavy fetters, a blazing fire, food that is so hard to swallow and a painful suffering on a day that fills everyone with fear.

An image of that day and the fear it spreads is then drawn: "*On the day when the earth and the mountains will shake, and the mountains will crumble into heaps of shifting sand.*" (Verse 14) The feeling of fear transcends all people to spread over the whole earth: it thus shudders and crashes, with the great mountains crumbling into heaps of sand. How, then, will humans react?

Having given this scary image, the *sūrah* addresses those unbelievers who enjoy a life of luxury reminding them of a great tyrant, Pharaoh, and how God swept him away: "*We have sent you a Messenger to be your witness, just as We sent a messenger to Pharaoh. Pharaoh disobeyed the messenger, and so We inflicted on him a severe punishment.*" (Verses 15–16) The terrible end suffered by Pharaoh is given in such a brief word that it strikes even more fear into their hearts, and this after the scene depicting the earth shaking and the mountains flattened.

These are two images of punishment, one in this life and one in the hereafter. How do those unbelievers think they will be saved from such punishment? "*How will you, if you continue to disbelieve, guard yourselves against a day that will turn children's hair grey? That is the day when the skies shall be rent asunder.*" (Verses 17–18) This is an image of a fearful event that leaves the sky rent asunder, after the earth and the mountains have crumbled into sand. It turns children's hair grey. The images of this terrifying event are drawn from a silent landscape as well as a living humanity. The *sūrah* portrays these images before the addressees as if they are taking place now. It then confirms this most emphatically: "*God's promise will certainly be fulfilled.*" (Verse 18) It is happening, no doubt. Whatever God wills is certain to be done.

Now the *sūrah* gives their hearts a gentle touch so that they may remember and choose the road to safety: "*This is but a reminder. Let him who will, take the way to his Lord.*" (Verse 19) The way to God is safer and easier to traverse. It spares people such a terrible outcome.

The verses carrying these warnings strike the unbelievers hard. They shake them violently, leaving them in great fear. At the same time, they provide strengthening reassurance to the Prophet and his small group of followers. They feel that God is with them, punishing their enemies. It is only but a short while and the appointed time will arrive. The matter will then be settled. God will take His enemies, who are their

enemies, and put them to the fate they deserve. God does not abandon the believers to His enemies, even though He may give His enemies respite for a while.

A Hard Duty is Relaxed

Then comes the second part of the *sūrah*, consisting of a single, long verse that was revealed one year after the first part, according to the more authentic reports:

> *Your Lord knows that you stand in prayer nearly two-thirds of the night, or one-half or a third of it, as do some of your followers. It is God who determines the measure of night and day. He is aware that you will not be able to keep a measure of it, and therefore He turns towards you in His grace. Recite of the Qur'ān as much as may be easy for you. He knows that some of you will be sick, others will go about in the land seeking God's bounty, and others will be fighting for God's cause. Therefore, recite whatever you may do with ease. Attend regularly to prayer, pay your obligatory charity* [*i.e.* zakāt], *and give God a goodly loan. Whatever good you may offer on your own behalf, you shall find it with God to be better and richer in reward. Seek God's forgiveness, for God is Much-Forgiving, Ever Merciful.* (Verse 20)

This is a compassionate touch, providing relief after much fatigue. It is a relaxation by God granted to the Prophet and the believers, when they have proved themselves to be dedicated totally to His divine message. They were exhausted after having stood up for long hours at night offering prayers in which very long passages of the Qur'ān were recited. God never wanted to afflict His Prophet with the Qur'ān, putting him to such hardship. Rather, He was only preparing him for the hard task that he was to undertake for the rest of his life. The believers who followed him would also have to share in this heavy burden.

The verse starts with friendly reassurance: "*Your Lord knows that you stand in prayer nearly two-thirds of the night, or one-half or a third of it, as do some of your followers.*" (Verse 20) He has seen you doing it, and what you and your Companions offered of night worship has

been accepted and entered in God's records. He knows that you have abandoned your beds, warm as they are on a cold night, preferring to listen to His directives. He is Compassionate towards you and those who are with you. "*It is God who determines the measure of night and day.*" (Verse 20) He causes the one to be longer and the other to be shorter. Thus, the night may get longer or shorter, but you are all carrying on with the duty required of you, staying up close to two-thirds of the night, or half of it, or even a third. He is aware of your weakness. He does not want to afflict you or put you to unbearable hardship; all He wants is that you should have the necessary training. Now that you have been trained, you can relax and take things easier: "*Recite of the Qur'ān as much as may be easy for you,*" during your night worship, without putting yourselves to much difficulty. God knows that things will happen to you and drain your energy, making standing long into the night worshipping too hard: "*He knows that some of you will be sick,*" and these cannot offer night worship. "*Others will go about in the land seeking God's bounty.*" (Verse 20) These need to attend to their work and earn their living. This is essential. God does not want people to abandon their life's needs and lead the life of a monk who is totally devoted to worship. "*And others will be fighting for God's cause.*" (Verse 20) God will permit you to stand up and fight against those who wage aggression against you. He will permit you to fight so that Islam will have its safe and sovereign place. You may, then, relax and approach your duty in a comfortable way: "*Therefore, recite whatever you may do with ease.*" (Verse 20) Let there be no exhaustion or hardship. However, you must attend to all obligatory worship: "*Attend regularly to prayer, pay your obligatory charity* [*i.e.* zakāt]." (Verse 20) When you have done this you may wish to add voluntary charity, which will increase your reward: "*And give God a goodly loan. Whatever good you may offer on your own behalf, you shall find it with God to be better and richer in reward.*" (Verse 20) Turn to God, appealing for forgiveness of your shortcomings. Man remains short of what is needed, no matter how diligent he tries to be. "*Seek God's forgiveness, for God is Much-Forgiving, Ever Merciful.*" (Verse 20)

This is a compassionate touch, providing relaxation and reassurance after a whole year of night worship. God relaxed this duty for Muslims,

making night worship voluntary, rather than an obligatory duty. The Prophet, however, continued on the same lines, offering night worship for no less than one-third of the night. He would appeal to his Lord in the depths of the night, and receive from Him what he needed for his struggle in life. Although his eyes might sleep, his heart would not. His heart was always busy with God's remembrance. It had no desire for anything else in this life.

SŪRAH 74

Al-Muddaththir

(Wrapped in Cloak)

Prologue

The information we expressed in the previous *sūrah,* The Enfolded One, about the occasion and timing of its revelation, also applies to this *sūrah*. Some reports suggest that it was the first to be revealed after *Sūrah* 96, The Germ Cell, while other reports suggest that it was revealed after the Islamic message went public, when the unbelievers began their persecution campaign against the believers in earnest.

Al-Bukhārī mentions a report by Yaḥyā ibn Abī Kathīr who says that he asked Abū Salamah ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān about the first Qur'ānic revelation. He answered that it was *Sūrah Al-Muddaththir*. "I told him that people said that it was *Sūrah* 96, beginning with '*Read in the name of your Lord*.' Abū Salamah said that he asked Jābir ibn 'Abdullāh about this and when Jābir replied that it was *al-Muddaththir,* he said to him what you had just said. Jābir replied that he only gave me what the Prophet himself said to his Companions: 'I went in seclusion at Ḥirā', and when I finished my time there, I came down. I heard a call, and I looked to my right and left but could see nothing. I came to Khadījah, saying: "Wrap me in a cloak and pour some cold water on me." They did so. I then received the revelation: "*You, wrapped in your cloak, arise and give warning. Glorify your Lord's greatness.*"

Jābir reports that he heard the Prophet speaking about early revelations. He said: "While I was walking, I heard a voice coming from the sky. I lifted my eyes to the sky and I saw the angel who came to me when I was at Ḥirā' sitting on a chair in between the sky and the earth. I fell to the ground. Then I came hurriedly to my people, saying: 'Wrap me. Cover me.' I then received the revelation: '*You, wrapped in your cloak, arise and give warning. Glorify your Lord's greatness; clean your garments; stay away from all filth.*' Then more revelations came in succession.

Commenting on this *ḥadīth*, Ibn Kathīr says in his commentary on the Qur'ān: "This is the accepted report. It means that revelations started before this, because of the Prophet saying, 'I saw the angel who came to me when I was at Ḥirā'.' That angel was obviously Gabriel who visited the Prophet saying: '*Read in the name of your Lord who has created – created man out of a clinging cell mass.*[1] *Read – for your Lord is the most Bountiful One, who has taught the use of the pen, taught man what he did not know.*' (96: 1–5) A lull in revelation then took place, and thereafter the angel again came to him. To reconcile the different reports we say that the first revelation the Prophet received after the lull was this *sūrah*."

A different report is given by al-Ṭabarānī on the authority of Ibn 'Abbās: "Al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah prepared food for a number of people from the Quraysh, and when they had finished their meal, he asked them what they thought of Muḥammad. Some said that he was a sorcerer, but others said he was not. Some said he was a soothsayer, but others denied this. Others still said he was a poet, but yet others objected. Then some said that what he said was mere 'sorcery handed down from olden times'. They all agreed to this. When the Prophet was informed of this, he felt very sad. He covered his head and wrapped himself up. God revealed to him: "*You, wrapped in your cloak, arise and give warning. Glorify your Lord's greatness; clean your garments; stay away from all filth; do not hold up what you give away, showing it to be much; but to your Lord turn in patience.*" (Verses 1–7)

1. This translation of this second verse of *Sūrah* 96 is more accurate than what I have given in Vol. XVIII, or what is variously given in other Qur'ānic translations. – Editor's note.

This report is almost identical to the one that refers to the preceding *sūrah*, The Enfolded One. Thus, we cannot be at all certain which of these two *sūrahs* preceded the other, or which was revealed on what occasion.

Yet a close look at the text of the *sūrah* suggests that its first seven verses were probably revealed in the very early days of the Islamic message. The same may be said of the first nine verses of *Sūrah* 73, The Enfolded One. Both openings aimed to prepare the Prophet for his great task, particularly when he needed to go public and address all the community with his message. He would then have to face strong opposition and compounded trouble that required such preparations. This would mean that the rest of the two *sūrahs* was revealed later, when the Prophet faced determined rejection and false accusations of fabricating his message.

Nevertheless, this does not exclude the other possibility that the openings of the two *sūrahs* were revealed together with what followed them. This so as to reply to the denial by the Quraysh and to comfort the Prophet who took their scheming to heart. Thus, the two *sūrahs* would be like *Sūrah* 68, The Pen, which is also discussed in this volume.

Be that as it may, the *sūrah* begins with an address from on high assigning a great mission to the Prophet, one that required he get out of bed and start striving: "*You, wrapped in your cloak, arise and give warning.*" (Verses 1–2) He is directed to prepare himself for his great task, taking the measures outlined to him in the *sūrah*: "*Glorify your Lord's greatness; clean your garments; stay away from all filth; do not hold up what you give away, showing it to be much; but to your Lord turn in patience.*" (Verses 3–7) Like the one in the preceding *sūrah*, this directive ends with the need to be patient.

The *sūrah* then includes a strong warning to those who deny the Day of Judgement, threatening them with a war directly waged by God, on the same lines as the warning given in the preceding *sūrah*: "*When the trumpet is sounded that will be a day of anguish, far from easy for the unbelievers. Leave to me the one I created alone, to whom I have granted vast wealth, and sons by his side, making life smooth and easy for him; yet he greedily desires that I give him more. No! He has set himself stubbornly against Our revelations. I will constrain him to endure a painful uphill climb.*" (Verses 8–17)

The *sūrah* makes special mention of this person who was particularly hostile to the Islamic message, but without naming him. It paints an image of his scheming against Islam, in the same way as we have seen in *Sūrah* 68. It may be that both *sūrahs* talk of the same person, said to be al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah, but more of this later. The *sūrah* mentions the reason for God's warning to this person: "*He thought and he schemed. Damn him, how he schemed! Again, damn him, how he schemed! He looked around, then he frowned and glared, then he turned his back and gloried in his arrogance, and said, 'This is just sorcery handed down from olden times! This is nothing but the word of a mere mortal!'*" (Verses 18–25) The *sūrah* then specifies his destiny: "*I will cast him into the scorching fire. Would that you knew what the scorching fire is like! It leaves nothing, and spares nothing; it appears before mankind, guarded by nineteen.*" (Verses 26–30)

The mention of the '*scorching fire*' and the nineteen guards in charge of it invited much questioning from the unbelievers who also added to it ridicule and sarcastic remarks, and raised doubts among those who were not firm in faith. The *sūrah* outlines God's wisdom in mentioning this number, giving us a glimpse of the world beyond our perception and the fact that knowledge of this world is God's own preserve. This glimpse sheds light on some aspects of the Islamic concept of this world beyond: "*We have appointed none other than angels to guard the fire, and We have made their number a test for the unbelievers. Thus those who have been granted revelations in the past may be convinced and the believers may grow yet more firm in their faith; and so those who have been granted revelations and the believers will entertain no doubt; but the sick at heart and the unbelievers will ask, 'What could God mean by this image?' Thus God lets go astray whomever He wills, and guides whomever He wills. No one knows your Lord's forces except Him. This is all but a reminder for mankind.*" (Verse 31)

The whole question of hell and the life to come is then related to some scenes of the universe which all people see. Thus the *sūrah* combines the inspiration of these scenes with the feelings aroused by the earlier warnings: "*No! By the moon! By the night when it departs, and the shining dawn! It is indeed one of the mighty things, a warning to all mankind, to those of you who choose to go ahead or to lag behind.*" (Verses 32–37)

The *sūrah* shows the respective positions of the unbelievers and the righteous. The unbelievers will make a long confession explaining the reasons why they deserved their fate on that day of reckoning and requital. This is followed by a final word about them, when no word of intercession on their behalf will be of any use: "*Every soul is held in pledge for what it has wrought, except for those on the right hand. They will be in gardens, and will ask about the guilty ones: 'What brought you into the scorching fire?' They will answer: 'We were not among those who prayed, neither did we feed the needy; but we indulged with others in vain talk, and we denied the Day of Judgement until there came upon us that which is certain.' So, of no benefit to them could be the pleas of any intercessors.*" (Verses 38–48)

Having painted this image of their position of humiliation and shameful confession, the *sūrah* wonders at the unbelievers' attitude to the call that seeks to remind them of the way to save themselves. It paints a sarcastic picture that invites ridicule at their wild resistance: "*What is the matter with them that they turn away from all admonition like terrified asses fleeing from a lion?*" (Verses 49–51) It exposes their arrogance, which is the true reason for their obstinate rejection of every caring advice: "*Every one of them demands to be given revelations unfolded before him.*" (Verse 52) They are so envious of the Prophet, thinking that they were more deserving of being given the divine message. There is, however, another deep reason: "*No! They do not fear the life to come.*" (Verse 53)

Finally, the *sūrah* makes a categorical statement that leaves no room for favours for anyone: "*No! This is indeed an admonition. Let him who will, take heed.*" (Verses 54–55) All is left up to God's will: "*They, however, will not take heed unless God so wills. He is the Lord to be feared, the Lord of forgiveness.*" (Verse 56)

The *sūrah* represents a stage of the hard fought struggle in which the Qur'ān is in combat with *jāhiliyyah* and its ingrained notions and concepts. It was also combating headstrong and deliberate rejection using diverse methods. There are many similarities of approach between this *sūrah* and *Sūrahs* 73 and 68, which suggests that all three were revealed within the same period, dealing with similar situations. The only exception, of course, is the second part of *Sūrah* 73, which as we have seen deals with something different.

The present *sūrah* is characterized by short verses and a fast flow. Its verses have a variety of endings and rhymes. Its beat moves slowly at times, but is very fast at others, particularly when it describes the individual who comes in for criticism, or when it paints the image of hell's scorching fire. This variation of tone, beat, rhyme, images and scenery gives the *sūrah* a distinctive ambience, particularly as it picks up a rhyme that has already been used and changed, or when the rhyme changes in the same section to deliver an intended surprise. We will now look at the *sūrah* in detail.

Al-Muddaththir
(Wrapped in Cloak)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

You, wrapped in your cloak, (1)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلۡمُدَّثِّرُ ١

arise and give warning. (2)

قُمۡ فَأَنذِرۡ ٢

Glorify your Lord's greatness; (3)

وَرَبَّكَ فَكَبِّرۡ ٣

clean your garments; (4)

وَثِيَابَكَ فَطَهِّرۡ ٤

stay away from all filth; (5)

وَٱلرُّجۡزَ فَٱهۡجُرۡ ٥

do not hold up what you give away, showing it to be much; (6)

وَلَا تَمۡنُن تَسۡتَكۡثِرُ ٦

but to your Lord turn in patience. (7)

وَلِرَبِّكَ فَٱصۡبِرۡ ٧

When the trumpet is sounded (8)

فَإِذَا نُقِرَ فِي ٱلنَّاقُورِ ٨

that will be a day of anguish, (9)

فَذَٰلِكَ يَوۡمَئِذٖ يَوۡمٌ عَسِيرٌ ٩

far from easy for the unbelievers. (10)

عَلَى ٱلْكَٰفِرِينَ غَيْرُ يَسِيرٍ ﴿١٠﴾

Leave to me the one I created alone, (11)

ذَرْنِى وَمَنْ خَلَقْتُ وَحِيدًا ﴿١١﴾

to whom I have granted vast wealth, (12)

وَجَعَلْتُ لَهُۥ مَالًا مَّمْدُودًا ﴿١٢﴾

and sons by his side, (13)

وَبَنِينَ شُهُودًا ﴿١٣﴾

making life smooth and easy for him; (14)

وَمَهَّدتُّ لَهُۥ تَمْهِيدًا ﴿١٤﴾

yet he greedily desires that I give him more. (15)

ثُمَّ يَطْمَعُ أَنْ أَزِيدَ ﴿١٥﴾

No! He has set himself stubbornly against Our revelations. (16)

كَلَّآ ۖ إِنَّهُۥ كَانَ لِءَايَٰتِنَا عَنِيدًا ﴿١٦﴾

I will constrain him to endure a painful uphill climb! (17)

سَأُرْهِقُهُۥ صَعُودًا ﴿١٧﴾

He thought and he schemed. (18)

إِنَّهُۥ فَكَّرَ وَقَدَّرَ ﴿١٨﴾

Damn him, how he schemed! (19)

فَقُتِلَ كَيْفَ قَدَّرَ ﴿١٩﴾

Again, damn him, how he schemed! (20)

ثُمَّ قُتِلَ كَيْفَ قَدَّرَ ﴿٢٠﴾

He looked around, (21)

ثُمَّ نَظَرَ ﴿٢١﴾

then he frowned and glared, (22)

ثُمَّ عَبَسَ وَبَسَرَ ﴿٢٢﴾

then he turned his back and gloried in his arrogance, (23)

ثُمَّ أَدْبَرَ وَٱسْتَكْبَرَ ﴿٢٣﴾

and said, 'This is just sorcery handed down from olden times! (24)

فَقَالَ إِنْ هَٰذَآ إِلَّا سِحْرٌ يُؤْثَرُ ﴿٢٤﴾

This is nothing but the word of a mere mortal!' (25)

إِنْ هَٰذَآ إِلَّا قَوْلُ ٱلْبَشَرِ ﴿٢٥﴾

I will cast him into the scorching fire. (26)

سَأُصْلِيهِ سَقَرَ ﴿٢٦﴾

Would that you knew what the scorching fire is like! (27)

وَمَآ أَدْرَىٰكَ مَا سَقَرُ ﴿٢٧﴾

It leaves nothing, and spares nothing; (28)

لَا تُبْقِى وَلَا تَذَرُ ﴿٢٨﴾

it appears before mankind, (29)

لَوَّاحَةٌ لِّلْبَشَرِ ﴿٢٩﴾

guarded by nineteen. (30)

عَلَيْهَا تِسْعَةَ عَشَرَ ﴿٣٠﴾

We have appointed none other than angels to guard the fire, and We have made their number a test

وَمَا جَعَلْنَآ أَصْحَٰبَ ٱلنَّارِ إِلَّا مَلَٰٓئِكَةً
وَمَا جَعَلْنَا عِدَّتَهُمْ إِلَّا فِتْنَةً لِّلَّذِينَ

كَفَرُوا لِيَسْتَيْقِنَ ٱلَّذِينَ أُوتُوا ٱلْكِتَٰبَ وَيَزْدَادَ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓا إِيمَٰنًا وَلَا يَرْتَابَ ٱلَّذِينَ أُوتُوا ٱلْكِتَٰبَ وَٱلْمُؤْمِنُونَ وَلِيَقُولَ ٱلَّذِينَ فِى قُلُوبِهِم مَّرَضٌ وَٱلْكَٰفِرُونَ مَاذَآ أَرَادَ ٱللَّهُ بِهَٰذَا مَثَلًا كَذَٰلِكَ يُضِلُّ ٱللَّهُ مَن يَشَآءُ وَيَهْدِى مَن يَشَآءُ وَمَا يَعْلَمُ جُنُودَ رَبِّكَ إِلَّا هُوَ وَمَا هِىَ إِلَّا ذِكْرَىٰ لِلْبَشَرِ ﴿٣١﴾

for the unbelievers. Thus those who have been granted revelations in the past may be convinced and the believers may grow yet more firm in their faith; and so those who have been granted revelations and the believers will entertain no doubt; but the sick at heart and the unbelievers will ask, 'What could God mean by this image?' Thus God lets go astray whomever He wills, and guides whomever He wills. No one knows your Lord's forces except Him. This is all but a reminder for mankind. (31)

كَلَّا وَٱلْقَمَرِ ﴿٣٢﴾

No! By the moon! (32)

وَٱلَّيْلِ إِذْ أَدْبَرَ ﴿٣٣﴾

By the night when it departs, (33)

وَٱلصُّبْحِ إِذَآ أَسْفَرَ ﴿٣٤﴾

and the shining dawn! (34)

إِنَّهَا لَإِحْدَى ٱلْكُبَرِ ﴿٣٥﴾

It is indeed one of the mighty things, (35)

نَذِيرًا لِّلْبَشَرِ ﴿٣٦﴾

a warning to all mankind, (36)

لِمَن شَآءَ مِنكُمْ أَن يَتَقَدَّمَ أَوْ يَتَأَخَّرَ ﴿٣٧﴾

to those of you who choose to go ahead or to lag behind. (37)

Every soul is held in pledge for what it has wrought, (38)

كُلُّ نَفْسٍۭ بِمَا كَسَبَتْ رَهِينَةٌ ﴿٣٨﴾

except for those on the right hand. (39)

إِلَّآ أَصْحَـٰبَ ٱلْيَمِينِ ﴿٣٩﴾

They will be in gardens, and will ask (40)

فِى جَنَّـٰتٍ يَتَسَآءَلُونَ ﴿٤٠﴾

about the guilty ones: (41)

عَنِ ٱلْمُجْرِمِينَ ﴿٤١﴾

'What brought you into the scorching fire?' (42)

مَا سَلَكَكُمْ فِى سَقَرَ ﴿٤٢﴾

They will answer: 'We were not among those who prayed, (43)

قَالُوا۟ لَمْ نَكُ مِنَ ٱلْمُصَلِّينَ ﴿٤٣﴾

neither did we feed the needy; (44)

وَلَمْ نَكُ نُطْعِمُ ٱلْمِسْكِينَ ﴿٤٤﴾

but we indulged with others in vain talk, (45)

وَكُنَّا نَخُوضُ مَعَ ٱلْخَآئِضِينَ ﴿٤٥﴾

and we denied the Day of Judgement (46)

وَكُنَّا نُكَذِّبُ بِيَوْمِ ٱلدِّينِ ﴿٤٦﴾

until there came upon us that which is certain.' (47)

حَتَّىٰٓ أَتَىٰنَا ٱلْيَقِينُ ﴿٤٧﴾

So, of no benefit to them could be the pleas of any intercessors. (48)

فَمَا تَنفَعُهُمْ شَفَـٰعَةُ ٱلشَّـٰفِعِينَ ﴿٤٨﴾

What is the matter with them that they turn away from all admonition (49)	فَمَا لَهُمْ عَنِ ٱلتَّذْكِرَةِ مُعْرِضِينَ ﴿٤٩﴾
like terrified asses (50)	كَأَنَّهُمْ حُمُرٌ مُّسْتَنفِرَةٌ ﴿٥٠﴾
fleeing from a lion? (51)	فَرَّتْ مِن قَسْوَرَةٍ ﴿٥١﴾
Every one of them demands to be given revelations unfolded before him. (52)	بَلْ يُرِيدُ كُلُّ ٱمْرِئٍ مِّنْهُمْ أَن يُؤْتَىٰ صُحُفًا مُّنَشَّرَةً ﴿٥٢﴾
No! They do not fear the life to come. (53)	كَلَّا بَل لَّا يَخَافُونَ ٱلْـَٔاخِرَةَ ﴿٥٣﴾
No! This is indeed an admonition. (54)	كَلَّآ إِنَّهُۥ تَذْكِرَةٌ ﴿٥٤﴾
Let him who will, take heed. (55)	فَمَن شَآءَ ذَكَرَهُۥ ﴿٥٥﴾
They, however, will not take heed unless God so wills. He is the Lord to be feared, the Lord of forgiveness. (56)	وَمَا يَذْكُرُونَ إِلَّآ أَن يَشَآءَ ٱللَّهُ هُوَ أَهْلُ ٱلتَّقْوَىٰ وَأَهْلُ ٱلْمَغْفِرَةِ ﴿٥٦﴾

Essential Preparations

You, wrapped in your cloak, arise and give warning. Glorify your Lord's greatness; clean your garments; stay away from all filth; do not hold up what you give away, showing it to be much; but to your Lord turn in patience. (Verses 1–7)

This is an address from on high, calling on the Prophet to get ready for his great task. He is to warn mankind, wake them up and save them from evil in this life and from the fire in the life to come, setting them on the way to salvation before it is too late. This is a hard, momentous task when assigned to an individual human being, even though he may be God's Prophet and Messenger. Mankind had, however, gone so far astray and were too steeped in sin, rebellion, arrogance and persistence. All this made advocacy of the divine faith the most difficult task to be assigned to anyone.

"*You, wrapped in your cloak, arise and give warning.*" (Verses 1–2) To give warning is the most obvious aspect of the divine message. It alerts people to the impending danger that threatens to engulf those who are oblivious of it, heading unaware into error. Such warning manifests God's grace which He bestows on people. They take away nothing of His kingdom when they go astray, and increase His kingdom by nothing when they follow His guidance. However, it is out of His grace that He gives them such care so as to save themselves from severe punishment in the life to come and to rid themselves of evil in this life. The fact that His messengers call on them to respond so as to earn His forgiveness and be admitted into His heaven is certainly a manifestation of His grace.

Having given His Messenger the instruction to warn others, He adds some directives for the Prophet to observe in his own life. The first of these is to "*Glorify your Lord's greatness.*" (Verse 3) Only your Lord is great and only He deserves to be glorified. This directive lays down an aspect of the Islamic concept of God and His oneness. Every person, every creature, every value and everything is small, while God alone is great. All entities, sizes, forces, values, events, situations, concepts and shapes dwindle into insignificance, while God alone is supreme, perfect and majestic. The Prophet is instructed to warn mankind, bearing all the difficulties of such a task, with this vision in mind. He will then think little of any force or plot aiming to impede his work, as he realizes that his Lord alone is great. Advocates of the divine message need to always keep this principle in mind when they go about fulfilling their difficult task.

The Prophet is then directed to maintain purity and cleanliness: "*Clean your garments.*" (Verse 4) In Arabic usage, this expression of cleaning one's garments means maintaining purity of heart and high moral values together with clean action. It refers to the purity of self which is covered by those garments. Such purity and cleanliness signify the condition that is best suited for receiving instructions from on high. Moreover, it is the closest thing to the nature of the Islamic message. Furthermore, it is necessary for the task of warning and delivering the message, advocating it in the midst of a multitude of forces and trends that bring with them much filth, dirt and indecency. The advocate of the divine faith needs to be perfectly clean so that he can save those who are tainted while allowing nothing to taint him. This directive shows deep understanding of the needs of those who undertake advocacy of God's faith in all types of social environment and situations.

The next directive requires the Prophet to steer away from polytheism and all that exposes people to God's punishment: "*stay away from all filth.*" (Verse 5) The Prophet stayed away from all this long before he was endowed with prophethood. His was an upright nature that disliked all deviation from the truth, and disowned all erroneous beliefs and loose morality. He never indulged in any unbecoming practice. However, this directive is a declaration of separation between two different routes that can never cross. The Arabic word *rujz,* which is translated here as 'filth', originally meant suffering or torment. It then came to signify anything that leads to it. Hence, the directive to abandon all such filth that incurs punishment and torment.

The Prophet is also directed to be self-effacing so as not to hold up what he has to exert of effort, thinking it to be much: "*Do not hold up what you give away, showing it to be much.*" (Verse 6) He was to give much, sacrifice much and put up with much hardship. Yet God wants him not to think too highly of what he has to give, feeling that it is much. To be a true advocate of the divine faith, one must not think of what one has to give or sacrifice for it. The sacrifice required is so great that no one can give it willingly unless he also forgets it, or rather does not feel it in the first place because he is so preoccupied with his duty towards God. In essence, he feels that whatever he has to give for His sake is only part of His grace and favour. Thus, giving the sacrifice and

exerting the effort are an aspect of grace God bestows on us. We should be grateful to Him for enabling us to give it in the first place, rather than holding it up, thinking we have done something great.

The last directive is to be patient: "But to your Lord turn in patience." (Verse 7) This is a directive that is given every time the Prophet is assigned a task or needs counselling. Patience is the most important prerequisite in this hard battle of advocating God's message. It is a battle against two enemies simultaneously: personal desires on the one hand, and external enemies motivated by their own desires on the other. The most effective weapon in this hard and long battle is patience for God's sake and with the aim to please Him.

When this divine directive has been given to the noble Prophet, the *sūrah* outlines the terms of the warning to be given. This is delivered in a way that alerts attention to the hard day they are warned about:

> *When the trumpet is sounded that will be a day of anguish, far from easy for the unbelievers.* (Verses 8–10)

The sounding of the trumpet is here expressed in a stronger way than normally used in other *sūrahs*. In its Arabic expression, *nuqira fin-nāqūr*, it gives a feeling of a sound that is sharper to the ear, almost beating on it. Hence, the day will be hard for the unbelievers. Its hardship is emphasized by negating all traces of ease. It is hard from start to finish, without any respite. No details are given of this hardship; it is left in general terms to impart a feeling of distress and choking. It behoves those unbelievers, then, to heed the warning before the trumpet is sounded, ushering in this very hard day.

Singled Out

This general warning gives way to the case of a particular individual who seems to have played a leading role in rejecting the divine message and plotting against it. The *sūrah* issues a crushing warning, painting an ugly image of him that invites derision. This is particularly so when his unpleasant features appear lifelike before our eyes:

Leave to me the one I created alone, to whom I have granted vast wealth, and sons by his side, making life smooth and easy for him; yet he greedily desires that I give him more. No! He has set himself stubbornly against Our revelations. I will constrain him to endure a painful uphill climb! He thought and he schemed. Damn him, how he schemed! Again, damn him, how he schemed! He looked around, then he frowned and glared, then he turned his back and gloried in his arrogance, and said, 'This is just sorcery handed down from olden times! This is nothing but the word of a mere mortal!' I will cast him into the scorching fire. Would that you knew what the scorching fire is like! It leaves nothing, and spares nothing; it appears before mankind, guarded by nineteen. (Verses 11–30)

There are several reports suggesting that the person so referred to is al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah. 'Ikrimah reports: "Al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah met the Prophet who read to him a passage of the Qur'ān. It appeared as though al-Walīd softened a bit. Abū Jahl heard of this, so he went to al-Walīd and said to him: 'Uncle! Your people are raising some money for you.' He asked for what reason. Abū Jahl answered: 'They want to give it to you, because you went to Muḥammad to see what you might gain from him.' [Abū Jahl was thus playing on a most sensitive point, trying to arouse al-Walīd's pride.] Al-Walīd said: 'The Quraysh know that I am the richest among them.' Abū Jahl said: 'Then say about him something to make clear to your people that you are opposed to what he says.' Al-Walīd said: 'What shall I say. None of you has better knowledge of poetry than me. I know all about poetry including the poetry of the *jinn*. What Muḥammad says is nothing like that. What he says is indeed sweet; it towers over all speech; it rises high and nothing can top it.' Abū Jahl said: 'Your people will not be satisfied unless you say something negative about him.' Al-Walīd said: 'Then give me time to think.' When he thought it over, he said of the Qur'ān: 'This is sorcery taken from olden times.' The above passage was then revealed in reference to him.

In another report, it is said that some of the Quraysh said: 'If al-Walīd follows Muḥammad, the whole tribe will follow suit.' Abū Jahl said: 'I will take care of him.' He went to see him... The report then

mentions the above conversation between the two, and that after long thinking al-Walīd said: 'It is sorcery handed down from olden times. Do you not see how it causes divisions between a man and his family, children and servants?'

Such was the event as reported. The Qur'ān, however, describes it in its own moving way. It so starts with a fearsome threat: "*Leave to me the one I created alone.*" (Verse 11) The address is made to the Prophet. He is told to leave this person to God. He created him alone, without anything in which he now takes pride, such as wealth, children, comforts and luxuries. Yet he still seeks to possess more. God says to the Prophet to leave him to Him, for He will battle with him. Here, we can only shudder as we imagine the overwhelming power of the Almighty moving to crush this powerless individual. This shuddering is experienced by the reader and the listener who are not meant by it. How, then, about the one facing this power?

The *sūrah* describes at length this creature and what God has given him of favours, before it mentions his headstrong rejection of the truth. God created him alone, deprived of everything, naked. Then He gave him plentiful wealth, and able sons who attend to his needs and give him authority and protection. He facilitated life for him. Yet, "*he greedily desires that I give him more.*" (Verse 15) He is neither content nor grateful. Or perhaps he hopes to receive revelations and a sacred book, as mentioned towards the end of the *sūrah*: "*Every one of them demands to be given revelations unfolded before him.*" (Verse 52) He did indeed envy the Prophet.

At this point he is strongly repudiated for his greed. He has not shown any gratitude to God for what He has given him.

"*No!*" The repudiating word is decisive. "*He has set himself stubbornly against Our revelations.*" (Verse 16) He deliberately set himself against all pointers to the truth and indicators of the way to true faith. He opposed the divine message and the Messenger preaching it, prevented others from listening to it and spread false rumours about it. This repudiation of the man and his attitude is followed by a threat to replace his ease with hardship: "*I will constrain him to endure a painful uphill climb.*" (Verse 17) This verse paints hardship in the movement. Going uphill is the most difficult and tiring way of walking. If the person set on such

an uphill road has no intention of so going up, but is instead being pushed, the hardship is even greater and more exhausting. At the same time, the statement expresses a reality. A person who moves away from the easy, friendly and facilitated path of faith will find himself in a hard to traverse passage that leads nowhere. He goes through life worried and distressed, as though he is rising high into the sky, or going up a rough, hard track carrying neither food nor drink, and expecting no comfort at the end.

The *sūrah* draws a sarcastic caricature of this person with grim features, frowning, thinking hard and trying to find fault with the Qur'ān. He is obsessed with trying to find an apt and negative description to label the Qur'ān with: "*He thought and he schemed. Damn him, how he schemed! Again, damn him, how he schemed! He looked around, then he frowned and glared, then he turned his back and gloried in his arrogance, and said, 'This is just sorcery handed down from olden times! This is nothing but the word of a mere mortal!'*" (Verses 18–25) The image we are given here takes us one glimpse at a time, step by step, and movement by movement. It is like watching a paint brush at work, rather than hearing words giving a meaning. More than that, it is like a scene in a film, consisting of many frames. One frame shows him thinking and scheming. This is coupled with an invocation, '*Damn him!*' and a derisive remark, '*how he schemed.*' Both invocation and derisive remark are repeated to heighten the effect. Another frame shows him looking here and there, in affected seriousness, again inviting ridicule. The next frame shows him frowning, and another shows his features grim. In both, the impression is that he is trying to concentrate, but in a laughable way. Yet, after all this labour, he comes up with nothing. He closes his eyes to the light and turns away from the truth. All he can say is: "*This is just sorcery handed down from olden times! This is nothing but the word of a mere mortal!*" (Verses 24–25)

These glimpses of such a sad individual are impressed on our minds more strongly than a painting or a film. Moreover, the man becomes the laughing stock for the rest of time. His miserable picture is raised there for all future generations to see.

Once the picture is hung in place and this miserable creature is seen by all there then comes a frightening warning: "*I will cast him into the scorching fire.*" (Verse 26) The warning is made even stronger by the

enigmatic air that surrounds the fire: "*Would that you knew what the scorching fire is like!*" (Verse 27) It is too great to be imagined! Yet another description is added to make it even more terrifying: "*It leaves nothing, and spares nothing.*" (Verse 28) It swallows everything, obliterating whoever or whatever is cast into it, leaving no trace. Moreover, it presents itself before people: "*It appears before mankind.*" (Verse 29) This echoes the verse in an earlier *sūrah*: "*It will claim all who turn their backs, and turn away from the truth.*" (70: 17) It thus shows itself, deliberately striking fear into those who are destined to suffer its torment. Guards stand there: "*Guarded by nineteen.*" (Verse 30) We do not know if the number refers to individual angels who are '*stern and mighty*', as described in *Sūrah* 66, or whether it refers to rows or types of angels. This is merely a piece of information to which more will be added in the *sūrah*.

A Test for Unbelievers

The believers received God's words with the sort of acceptance worthy of one who trusts his Lord and shows the sort of manners a servant should have. They neither doubted this piece of news nor questioned it. The unbelievers, on the other hand, received it all with hearts devoid of faith or seriousness. They had no reverence of God. Hence, they made sarcastic comments, making the number, i.e. the 19, the subject of endless jokes. One of them said: 'Will not each 10 of you be sufficient to overcome one of them?' Another said: 'You take care of two of these and I will take care of the rest. You will have nothing to worry about from them.'

It was then that the next verse was revealed, explaining God's purpose behind giving this piece of information on something that belongs to the realm beyond human perception and mentioning this particular figure. It makes clear that that realm and the knowledge of all that relates to it belongs to God alone. It also mentions the ultimate end that results from the mention of the scorching fire and its guard:

> *We have appointed none other than angels to guard the fire, and We have made their number a test for the unbelievers. Thus those who have been granted revelations in the past may be convinced and the*

> *believers may grow yet more firm in their faith; and so those who have been granted revelations and the believers will entertain no doubt; but the sick at heart and the unbelievers will ask, 'What could God mean by this image?' Thus God lets go astray whomever He wills, and guides whomever He wills. No one knows your Lord's forces except Him. This is all but a reminder for mankind.* (Verse 31)

The verse begins by mentioning the nature of the 19 guards whose number the unbelievers joked about: "*We have appointed none other than angels to guard the fire.*" (Verse 31) They belong to that species of creature the nature and strength of which are known only to God Almighty. He mentions elsewhere in the Qur'ān that the angels "*never disobey God in whatever He commands them and always do what they are bidden to do.*" (66: 6) This statement makes it clear that they always obey God's orders and that they have the power to do whatever He bids them. Since He has assigned to them the task of guarding hell, then they have been given the power to undertake this task and fulfil it as it should be done. Thus, there is no way that human beings can fight with them or subdue them. Such talk only betrays the unbelievers' crude ignorance of the nature of God's creation and how He conducts affairs.

"*We have made their number a test for the unbelievers.*" (Verse 31) It is the unbelievers that start arguing when the number is mentioned, because they cannot distinguish when an argument is out of place. Since this question belongs to the realm beyond, and mankind have no knowledge of it, then whatever God says about it should be accepted without argument. It should also be understood that mentioning this fact only, without adding further details, is the appropriate and beneficial way. To argue about it is futile, because argument can only be based on knowledge that does not fit with the information to hand. Their exact number, whatever it signifies, is determined by the One who coordinates everything in the universe and creates everything according to a specific measure. This number is like any other, and a person who wants to argue will make the same objection to any other number. Why are the heavens seven? Why was man created from dried clay, like pottery while the *jinn* were created from raging flames of fire, as mentioned in *Sūrah* 55? Why does pregnancy last nine months? Why do tortoises live for centuries?

Why this, and why that! The answer is that because the Creator who holds sway over all things has willed it so, and His will is always done! This is the final answer in such matters.

"*Thus those who have been granted revelations in the past may be convinced and the believers may grow yet more firm in their faith; and so those who have been granted revelations and the believers will entertain no doubt.*" (Verse 31) Both groups will find in the number of the guards of hell what will give some of them more certainty and give others firmer faith. The people given revelations in the past must have known something of this fact so that when they heard the Qur'ān confirming it, they were certain about it. As for the believers, whatever God says will add to their faith and make it firmer, because their hearts are open to receive facts directly, happy with every new piece of information from God. They realize that such a number serves a particular purpose in God's accurate and fine scheme of creation. Their faith thus grows firmer. This fact thus becomes more firmly established in the hearts of both groups and neither will then doubt anything that comes from God.

"*But the sick at heart and the unbelievers will ask, 'What could God mean by this image?'*" (Verse 31) The same fact leaves opposite effects on different hearts. While the people of the scriptures and the believers will have more faith as a result of mentioning the number of hell's guards, the very mention of this makes the unbelievers and hypocrites wonder about the reason for giving such an image. They neither appreciate the wisdom behind this strange matter, nor acknowledge God's absolute wisdom of creation. Besides, they are in doubt about the information given and the good purpose served by it.

"*Thus God lets go astray whomever He wills, and guides whomever He wills.*" (Verse 31) God mentions facts and puts up signs and indicators. Different hearts receive it differently. A group will be guided to the truth by such facts, as God wills, while another will go astray, also as God wills. Everything is ultimately determined by God's will which is absolutely free. Human beings were created by God's will with a dual tendency to follow either His guidance or error. Thus, every person acts within God's will whether he follows guidance or goes astray.

When we fully appreciate the fact that God's will is absolutely free, without restriction or impediment, and that everything that occurs in

the universe ultimately reverts to His will, and when we put this in the proper perspective, we spare our minds the narrow and endless argument on what people call 'predestination'. Such argument is futile, because it looks at this question, which relates to God the Infinite, from a narrow angle, limiting it to human logic and experience.

God clearly put before us two ways: one follows His guidance and the other leads to error. He has laid down for us a method of action which will, if we implement it, ensure that we have all the guidance we need, live happily and earn His reward. He has also pointed out to us other methods which lead us into error, misery and ruin. He has not required us to know anything beyond this, and has not given us the power to know more. He tells us that His will is absolutely free and inevitable. We should, therefore, deal with understanding this within our abilities and limitations, following the way of guidance and avoiding the different ways leading into error. We must not enter into any futile argument about something that we will never be able to fathom, because it pertains to the world beyond. When we do so, we arrive at the conclusion that all the efforts theologists and philosophers put into the question of predestination, in the way they argued it, were useless, because they were the wrong efforts put into the wrong field.

We do not know what God's hidden will is concerning us, but we do know what God wants of us: namely to deserve His grace which He has committed Himself to bestow upon us. Our proper course, then, is to devote our efforts to the fulfilment of what He has required us to do, leaving His hidden will to Him alone. What will happen to us is according to His will, and we will know it when it happens, and not before. What happens will fulfil His purpose and will be according to His wisdom.

"*No one knows your Lord's forces except Him.*" (Verse 31) The nature, function and effect of these forces are all matters beyond our perception. Of these, He reveals to us what He wishes. His decision is final. No one need argue about anything God has chosen not to inform us about. Such argument is futile.

"*This is all but a reminder for mankind.*" (Verse 31) 'This' may be a reference to God's forces, or to hell and those guarding it as these are also part of God's forces. Mentioning these is meant to alert and

warn people, not to open a way for conjecture. Believing hearts will certainly benefit by such reminders, but erring ones will continue to argue endlessly.

A Look at the Universe

The *sūrah* now relates the truths of the life to come, the scorching fire of hell and God's forces to various aspects of His fine creation in the universe, which people often overlook because of long familiarity. Yet these are evident proofs of God's limitless power of creation and His perfect design of the universe:

> *No! By the moon! By the night when it departs, and the shining dawn! It is indeed one of the mighty things, a warning to all mankind.* (Verses 32–36)

The sight of the moon, the departing night and the shining dawn are certainly inspiring. They say much to the human heart, whispering secrets and arousing deep feelings. In its quick reference to these, the Qur'ān touches our innermost selves where feelings and secrets are settled. It is rarely the case that people contemplate the sight of the moon as it rises, travels or sets without the moon whispering some universal secret in their ears. It sometimes takes no more than to stand in the moonlight in order to feel your heart being washed, as if you were bathing in light. It is hardly possible for anyone to look carefully at the night as it starts to depart, at that time of complete serenity before sunrise, when the world starts to wake up and opens its eyes, without being profoundly affected by it. Likewise, it is hardly possible for anyone not to be alert to the scene of dawn as it breaks and begins to shine without experiencing a sense of opening up that makes us aware of a change of feeling. This change makes us ready to receive the light that shines within our hearts just as we receive the light shining over the world around us.

God, the Creator of the human heart, knows that these very sights can sometimes work wonders with this heart, as though they are recreating it. Beyond these shining feelings and openings up, the moon, the night and the dawn all refer to a great truth to which the Qur'ān alerts us.

They all point to God's power of creation, His limitless wisdom and His fine coordination of His creation.

God Almighty swears by these great universal truths in order to alert those who are oblivious to their greatness and the message they impart. He swears that the scorching fire, or its guards, or the hereafter and its events, is one of the great wonders that serve as a warning to mankind of the impending danger ahead: "*It is indeed one of the mighty things, a warning to all mankind.*" (Verses 35–36) The very oath, its contents and subject matter are all like hammers striking hard at people's hearts. This is in perfect harmony with the sounding of the trumpet mentioned earlier, and with the opening of the *sūrah* as it addresses the Prophet and bids him to arise and warn. The whole atmosphere is one of hard hitting, warning of an impending danger.

Individual Responsibility

The *sūrah* now declares that every soul bears responsibility for itself, leaving everyone to choose for themselves. It also states that each soul will have to account for its choices and be judged according to its deeds:

> *It is indeed one of the mighty things, a warning to all mankind, to those of you who choose to go ahead or to lag behind. Every soul is held in pledge for what it has wrought.* (Verses 35–38)

All people, every single one of them, are responsible for themselves, choosing their own positions, going ahead or lagging behind, achieving an honourable status or bringing humiliation upon themselves. Thus, every soul is tied to what it does and the action it takes. God has shown all people the way that leads to Him so that they can take that way with open eyes. As this declaration of individual responsibility is made against the backdrop of inspiring universal scenes, as well as the scene of the scorching fire that spares nothing, it has its profound effect.

It is further declared, however, that an exception is made in the case of the believers who are referred to here as the ones on the right hand. These are untied. They are also given the right to ask the guilty about what has perpetrated their fate:

> *Except for those on the right hand. They will be in gardens, and will ask about the guilty ones: 'What brought you into the scorching fire?' They will answer: 'We were not among those who prayed, neither did we feed the needy; but we indulged with others in vain talk, and we denied the Day of Judgement until there came upon us that which is certain.'* (Verses 39–47)

That the believers are thus excepted is due to God's grace, for He blesses their good deeds and multiplies them. This declaration, at this particular point, touches all hearts. It first touches the hearts of the guilty who were bent on denying the truth. They see themselves in such a humiliating position, making long confessions, while the believers, whom they looked down upon in this world, stand in a position of dignity, asking them as if they are put in a position of authority: "*What brought you into the scorching fire?*" (Verse 42) It also touches the hearts of the believers who used to be at the receiving end of much hardship from those same guilty ones. Now they see themselves in a high position while their arrogant enemies of old are placed in such humiliation. The image is so powerful that it gives both sides a feeling that it is actually taking place now, as though the life of this world has come to an end and is now a thing of the past.

The long confession by the guilty gives details of the many wrongs they have perpetrated, and for which they are led to the scorching fire. They humbly admit to these in front of the believers. "*They will answer: We were not among those who prayed.*" (Verse 43) This is a reference to faith altogether, rather than to the act of prayer. It highlights the great importance of prayer in the Islamic faith, presenting it as a symbol and proof of faith. Denying it puts a person in the ranks of the unbelievers.

"*Neither did we feed the needy.*" (Verse 44) This comes next to denying the faith. It is an act of worship in respect of His creatures, following worship dedicated to Him only. The fact that this quality is expressed so strongly in several places in the Qur'ān gives us an impression of the social environment the Qur'ān addressed. It was a hard environment where kindness to the poor was rare, despite showing great generosity when that served social interests. Such generosity did not apply in situations of real need or pure kindness.

"*But we indulged with others in vain talk.*" (Verse 45) This describes how they took faith lightly and treated it carelessly, in jest, when it was the most important matter in man's life. Indeed man should resolve this issue of faith within his own mind and heart, before he attends to any other matter in life, because it is the issue that gives him his concept of life, values and standards. It provides him with the light that shows him his way in life. How, then, can man take it other than seriously? How can he treat it as vain talk in which he indulges with similarly careless people?

"*And we denied the Day of Judgement.*" (Verse 46) This is the core guilt. A person who denies the Day of Judgement will have no proper standard by which to evaluate things. All values are shaken in his mind. To him, the scope of life becomes too narrow as it dwindles into this limited space of his time on earth. He looks at the consequences of events as they are within this limited space of time and place, and he is unhappy. How can he be otherwise when he does not take the final outcome into account? Indeed, all his standards, and all matters of this life will be defective, before his evaluation of the life to come and his position there becomes faulty. Hence, he ends in utter ruin.

The guilty admit that they continued in that situation, unwilling to pray, being uncharitable to the needy, indulging in vain talk and denying the Day of Judgement, "*until there came upon us that which is certain.*" (Verse 47) What came upon them is death, which ends all doubt, bringing the final say and leaving no room for regret, repentance or the mending of one's ways.

The *sūrah* comments on their abject humiliation by raising no hope of any change in their status: "*So, of no benefit to them could be the pleas of any intercessors.*" (Verse 48) The whole thing is settled. The end of the guilty has been determined. There is no one to intercede on their behalf anyway. Assuming that such intercessors are there and willing, which is not the case, their pleas will be of no benefit to the guilty.

Who Heeds the Reminder?

The *sūrah* now puts them back in this life, where they have the chance to do something before facing such an abject outcome. Yet they turn

away, fleeing from the guidance that would bring them only what is good. The means of salvation are shown to them, but they run away from them. Therefore, the *sūrah* draws a sarcastic image of their situation:

> *What is the matter with them that they turn away from all admonition like terrified asses fleeing from a lion?* (Verses 49–51)

The scene of asses or zebras in great agitation, running in all directions as they hear a lion roaring, was well known to the Arabs. It is a scene of fast movement in a state of panic. Hence, when it is applied to humans, it invites loud laughter. This is especially so if those humans were in real fear of some impending danger. What can be said about them if such is their state, like terrified asses, only because someone is reminding them of their Lord and their eventual destiny, showing them the way to avoid such misery and pain? The image drawn is profound and effective. Those who contemplate it will be too ashamed if they find themselves in it.

Such is their external condition. The *sūrah*, however, describes their inner feelings as well: "*Every one of them demands to be given revelations unfolded before him.*" (Verse 52) It is, then, a question of envy. They begrudge the Prophet for God having given him this exceptional favour. Each one of them is so keen to attain the same status and to be given scriptures to announce to mankind. This must be a reference to their elders who felt hurt that they were bypassed when divine revelations were granted to Muḥammad (peace be upon him). Hence, they said: "*Why was not this Qur'ān revealed to some great man of the two cities?*" (43: 31) God certainly knows to whom to entrust His final message. He chose for this task a great man with the noblest of hearts. This was enough to fill those unbelievers with rancour. Their unjustifiable grudges were also enough for the Qur'ān to expose.

The *sūrah* continues its presentation of their inner feelings. As it censures their envy, which lacks sound basis, the *sūrah* now gives another reason for the unbelievers' continued denial of the truth and their rejection of the message: "*No! They do not fear the life to come.*" (Verse 53) It is indeed their lack of fear of what may happen in the life to come that leads to their heedless attitude to reminders. It makes them react

illogically to the divine message. Had they genuinely felt the truth of the hereafter they would have had a totally different reaction.

The *sūrah* repudiates their attitude once more, as it puts its final word to them, leaving them to choose for themselves what they may: "*No! This is indeed an admonition. Let him who will, take heed.*" (Verses 54–55) This Qur'ān to which they refuse to listen, and from which they turn away like frightened asses, is a reminder highlighting the truth. Everyone adopts the attitude they want towards it. Whoever is willing to be reminded will have the reminder. Others choose their own way. The outcome is either heaven and the dignity it imparts or hell and the humiliation it involves. It all depends on one's own choice.

The *sūrah* concludes with a restatement of God's free will which ultimately determines all affairs. This is the truth the Qur'ān is keen to state whenever an occasion arises in order to give the believers the correct concept concerning His will, and its being absolutely free and universally applicable.

> *They, however, will not take heed unless God so wills. He is the Lord to be feared, the Lord of forgiveness.* (Verse 56)

Whatever happens in the universe is tied to God's grand will and occurs within it. It is not possible for anyone or anything to will something that is in conflict with God's will. It is His will that controls everything in the universe. It is the will that brought the universe into existence and established its rules and forces. Therefore, the universe, with all living things in it, moves within the framework of God's will that is unbound by limit or restriction.

Taking heed is something that God facilitates for everyone He knows to deserve it. When a servant of His shows that he or she has sincerity of intention, He directs them to what brings them closer to Him. No servant knows what God's will is for him, but everyone knows what God wants of them. He has explained this to them. Therefore, He helps, according to His free will, everyone who is sincere in the attempt to fulfil the duties He has assigned to them.

The Qur'ān aims to impress on every Muslim mind the dual notion that divine will is absolutely free and that it incorporates every will; this

so that we turn to it willingly and submit to it completely. This is the essential notion without which Islam cannot be firmly established in one's heart. When it is thus established, it initiates a comprehensive vision to which a Muslim resorts in all life events. This is why this principle is emphasized whenever the Qur'ān promises believers they will be in heaven, warns unbelievers against hell, and speaks of guidance and error. To take such a statement in a narrow way arguing about predestination is no more than taking a partial view of a universal truth, forcing it into a narrow vision that leads nowhere.

"*They, however, will not take heed unless God so wills.*" (Verse 56) Their will cannot be on a collision course with God's will. Indeed, they cannot move in any direction without the operation of God's will that so enables them to move. God is "*the Lord to be feared,*" by His servants. Hence, they are required to demonstrate this. He is also "*the Lord of forgiveness,*" who bestows this on His servants by His will. To fear God is to deserve forgiveness, and God is the Lord of both.

The *sūrah* concludes with this humbly felt glorification of God. It leaves us looking up to God. It leaves us hoping that He will guide us to His remembrance, so that we will always fear Him and that He will then grant us forgiveness.

SŪRAH 75

Al-Qiyāmah
(The Resurrection)

Prologue

This *sūrah* puts forward such a great number of truths, scenes, images, special effects, tones and touches that no attentive heart can easily handle or escape from them. Furthermore, its distinctive style and musical cadence also combine to enhance its effect and bring it to a level that is again difficult to resist or to shed. It starts with two short verses with distinctive notes about the Day of Resurrection and the self-reproaching soul: "*I need not swear by the Day of Resurrection and I need not swear by the self-reproaching soul!*" (Verses 1–2) The *sūrah* then continues with a discourse that from start to finish relates to both the human soul and the Day of Resurrection, often coupling them together. It is as if the opening two verses sum up the subject matter of the whole *sūrah*, or that they set the tone influencing its notes in a fine and beautiful way.

One of the great truths the *sūrah* speaks about is death. The reality of how death applies to every living creature, and from which none can escape or divert it from a loved one is a hard truth. It occurs at every moment, and is applicable to young and old, rich and poor, strong and weak alike. All stand in the same position: there is no escape, no evasion, no resistance, no intercession and no deferment. This suggests that death comes from a higher source, one mankind cannot influence in any way. When it occurs, man simply submits to this higher source.

This is the note with which the *sūrah* takes hold of our hearts: "*Yet when the departing soul comes up to the throat, when it is said, 'Can any charmer [do something now]?' When he knows it is the final parting, and one leg will be joined with another, to your Lord he will on that day be driven.*" (Verses 26–30)

Another great truth highlighted in the *sūrah* is how man comes into existence in the first place, and its significance in confirming the truth of resurrection. In this way we see how man's creation occurs according to careful planning. God informs people of the fine stages of their coming into existence, and how these stages succeed one another in such a marvellous procession that only He could have designed. Indeed, even those who deny the resurrection do not claim a different origin for this process. This, in itself, provides irrefutable evidence of the presence of the One God, who deals death and determines its timing. Moreover, death provides clear evidence that resurrection is easy, and also implies that it is necessary. It is, thus, seen as being consistent with the planning whereby man has a clear purpose, and that his life does not end without him accounting for his deeds. This is the note that touches hearts at the beginning of the *sūrah*: "*Does man think that We will not put his bones together again?*" (Verse 3) As it draws to its end, the *sūrah* says: "*Does man think that he will be left without purpose? Was he not a mere drop of emitted sperm? It then became a clinging cell mass, and then God created and shaped it, fashioning out of it the two sexes, male and female. Is He not, then, able to bring the dead back to life?*" (Verses 36–40)

One of the scenes the *sūrah* paints is that of the Day of Resurrection and the great celestial events that take place on that day. In this, we see the psychological upheaval that leaves man at a loss, unable to decide how to face these events. Thus, the great upheaval occurs in the centre of the universe, as well as in the very depths of the human soul, leaving man like a mouse in a trap. This comes in response to man as he wonders, with much doubt, about whether the Day of Resurrection will ever come. In so doing, he treats it with carelessness, persisting in his erring ways. God's response to all this is delivered with a quick rhythm, one that paints a fast succession of images and glimpses: "*Yet man wants to deny what lies ahead of him. He asks: 'When will this Day of Resurrection be?' When the sight is dazzled and the moon eclipsed, when the sun and the*

moon are brought together, on that day man will say: 'Where to flee?' But no! There is no refuge. On that day, to your Lord all shall return. Man will be told on that day all that he put forward and all that he put back. Man will be a witness against himself, even though he may put up his excuses." (Verses 5–15)

One of these images is that of the believers, with full trust in their Lord, looking up to His benevolent face in the midst of all this horror. Another image is of those on the other side, who have no bond with their Lord and no hope of His grace. These expect to receive what their earlier denials, disbelief and disobedience entail. This image is presented forcefully, as if it is taking place at the very moment the *sūrah* is being recited. It responds to people's love of this present world and their disregard of the life to come: "*Yet you love this fleeting life, and give no thought to the life to come. Some faces will on that day be radiant with happiness, looking towards their Lord; and some faces will on that day be overcast with despair, realizing that a great calamity is about to befall them.*" (Verses 20–25)

Four verses interrupt this sequence of truths to deliver a special directive to the Prophet concerning the way he receives Qur'ānic revelations. It would also appear that this directive relates to something in particular about this *sūrah*. The Prophet had feared that he might forget something of what was being revealed to him, and in his eagerness to ensure that he did not forget, he used to repeat its verses, one by one, as they were recited to him. He would vocalize the words to make sure that he learnt them by heart. Therefore, he was given the following instruction: "*Do not move your tongue repeating its words in haste. We shall see to its collection and recitation. When We recite it, follow its recitation. Then it will be for Us to make its meaning clear.*" (Verses 16–19) This instruction is given to the Prophet to reassure him that the revelation of the Qur'ān, its preservation, collection and explanation of its message are left to the Almighty, the Author of the Qur'ān. The Prophet's own role is to receive the message and deliver it as he receives it. Therefore, he need not worry. He should receive the revelation in full and then he will find it engraved in his heart without change. This was exactly what happened. This instruction, however, has been retained at the precise point where it occurred. Is it not given in God's own words? God's word is sure to stay in place, whatever purpose it addresses. These four verses,

therefore, represent words He said, and therefore, they stay in His book like the rest of it. In fact, retaining these four verses in the middle of the *sūrah* points to an inspiring truth concerning all God's words, whatever their purpose happens to be. It tells us that every word God said to His Messenger, Muḥammad (peace be upon him), has been recorded; not a single letter has been lost.

As it listens to this *sūrah*, the human heart realizes that there is no escape. Man will have to account for his deeds, with no one to protect him from God. His existence, in both this life and the life to come, is determined by God, according to His knowledge and planning. Meanwhile, man plays around and thinks himself too important: "*He neither believed nor prayed, but denied the truth and turned away, then he went back to his people full of arrogance.*" (Verses 31–33) As he faces this large number of truths, images and special effects, man is given an implicit but highly effective warning: "*Your doom, man, comes nearer and nearer, and ever nearer and nearer.*" (Verses 34–35)

We see how the *sūrah* deals with man's obstinate rejection of the divine message, making him feel, in all clarity, the seriousness of its discourse about resurrection, the human soul and the accurate measure of life. It tells him that the Qur'ān is also a very serious matter: not a single letter of it will ever be lost because it is all God's own words.

We have thus outlined the truths and images presented in the *sūrah* individually, but when these are read in the *sūrah* itself and as a whole they give a totally different effect. The sequence of these images, the way they are intertwined, and their presentation of an aspect of the truth at one time and then giving another aspect of it a little later are all characteristics of the Qur'ān's inspiring style as it addresses the human heart. No other style or method could possibly achieve a similar effect.

Al-Qiyāmah
(The Resurrection)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

لَآ أُقۡسِمُ بِيَوۡمِ ٱلۡقِيَٰمَةِ ١

I need not swear by the Day of Resurrection (1)

وَلَآ أُقۡسِمُ بِٱلنَّفۡسِ ٱللَّوَّامَةِ ٢

and I need not swear by the self-reproaching soul! (2)

أَيَحۡسَبُ ٱلۡإِنسَٰنُ أَلَّن نَّجۡمَعَ عِظَامَهُۥ ٣

Does man think that We will not put his bones together again? (3)

بَلَىٰ قَٰدِرِينَ عَلَىٰٓ أَن نُّسَوِّيَ بَنَانَهُۥ ٤

Yes, indeed! We are able to put in perfect order his very fingertips! (4)

بَلۡ يُرِيدُ ٱلۡإِنسَٰنُ لِيَفۡجُرَ أَمَامَهُۥ ٥

Yet man wants to deny what lies ahead of him. (5)

يَسۡـَٔلُ أَيَّانَ يَوۡمُ ٱلۡقِيَٰمَةِ ٦

He asks: 'When will this Day of Resurrection be?' (6)

فَإِذَا بَرِقَ ٱلۡبَصَرُ ٧

When the sight is dazzled (7)

وَخَسَفَ ٱلۡقَمَرُ ٨

and the moon eclipsed, (8)

وَجُمِعَ ٱلشَّمۡسُ وَٱلۡقَمَرُ ٩

when the sun and the moon are brought together, (9)

on that day man will say: 'Where to flee?' (10)

يَقُولُ الْإِنسَانُ يَوْمَئِذٍ أَيْنَ الْمَفَرُّ ﴿١٠﴾

But no! There is no refuge. (11)

كَلَّا لَا وَزَرَ ﴿١١﴾

On that day, to your Lord all shall return. (12)

إِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ يَوْمَئِذٍ الْمُسْتَقَرُّ ﴿١٢﴾

Man will be told on that day all that he put forward and all that he put back. (13)

يُنَبَّأُ الْإِنسَانُ يَوْمَئِذٍ بِمَا قَدَّمَ وَأَخَّرَ ﴿١٣﴾

Man will be a witness against himself, (14)

بَلِ الْإِنسَانُ عَلَىٰ نَفْسِهِ بَصِيرَةٌ ﴿١٤﴾

even though he may put up his excuses. (15)

وَلَوْ أَلْقَىٰ مَعَاذِيرَهُ ﴿١٥﴾

Do not move your tongue repeating its words in haste. (16)

لَا تُحَرِّكْ بِهِ لِسَانَكَ لِتَعْجَلَ بِهِ ﴿١٦﴾

We shall see to its collection and recitation. (17)

إِنَّ عَلَيْنَا جَمْعَهُ وَقُرْآنَهُ ﴿١٧﴾

When We recite it, follow its recitation. (18)

فَإِذَا قَرَأْنَاهُ فَاتَّبِعْ قُرْآنَهُ ﴿١٨﴾

Then it will be for Us to make its meaning clear. (19)

ثُمَّ إِنَّ عَلَيْنَا بَيَانَهُ ﴿١٩﴾

Yet you love this fleeting life, (20)

كَلَّا بَلْ تُحِبُّونَ الْعَاجِلَةَ ﴿٢٠﴾

and give no thought to the life to come. (21)	وَتَذَرُونَ ٱلْـَٔاخِرَةَ ﴿٢١﴾
Some faces will on that day be radiant with happiness, (22)	وُجُوهٌ يَوْمَئِذٍ نَّاضِرَةٌ ﴿٢٢﴾
looking towards their Lord; (23)	إِلَىٰ رَبِّهَا نَاظِرَةٌ ﴿٢٣﴾
and some faces will on that day be overcast with despair, (24)	وَوُجُوهٌ يَوْمَئِذٍۭ بَاسِرَةٌ ﴿٢٤﴾
realizing that a great calamity is about to befall them. (25)	تَظُنُّ أَن يُفْعَلَ بِهَا فَاقِرَةٌ ﴿٢٥﴾
Yet when the departing soul comes up to the throat, (26)	كَلَّآ إِذَا بَلَغَتِ ٱلتَّرَاقِيَ ﴿٢٦﴾
when it is said, 'Can any charmer [do something now]?' (27)	وَقِيلَ مَنْ ۜ رَاقٍ ﴿٢٧﴾
When he knows it is the final parting, (28)	وَظَنَّ أَنَّهُ ٱلْفِرَاقُ ﴿٢٨﴾
and one leg will be joined with another, (29)	وَٱلْتَفَّتِ ٱلسَّاقُ بِٱلسَّاقِ ﴿٢٩﴾
to your Lord he will on that day be driven. (30)	إِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ يَوْمَئِذٍ ٱلْمَسَاقُ ﴿٣٠﴾
He neither believed nor prayed, (31)	فَلَا صَدَّقَ وَلَا صَلَّىٰ ﴿٣١﴾

but denied the truth and turned away, (32)

وَلَٰكِن كَذَّبَ وَتَوَلَّىٰ ﴿٣٢﴾

then he went back to his people full of arrogance. (33)

ثُمَّ ذَهَبَ إِلَىٰٓ أَهْلِهِۦ يَتَمَطَّىٰٓ ﴿٣٣﴾

Your doom, man, comes nearer and nearer, (34)

أَوْلَىٰ لَكَ فَأَوْلَىٰ ﴿٣٤﴾

and ever nearer and nearer. (35)

ثُمَّ أَوْلَىٰ لَكَ فَأَوْلَىٰٓ ﴿٣٥﴾

Does man think that he will be left without purpose? (36)

أَيَحْسَبُ ٱلْإِنسَٰنُ أَن يُتْرَكَ سُدًى ﴿٣٦﴾

Was he not a mere drop of emitted sperm? (37)

أَلَمْ يَكُ نُطْفَةً مِّن مَّنِىٍّ يُمْنَىٰ ﴿٣٧﴾

It then became a clinging cell mass, and then God created and shaped it, (38)

ثُمَّ كَانَ عَلَقَةً فَخَلَقَ فَسَوَّىٰ ﴿٣٨﴾

fashioning out of it the two sexes, male and female. (39)

فَجَعَلَ مِنْهُ ٱلزَّوْجَيْنِ ٱلذَّكَرَ وَٱلْأُنثَىٰٓ ﴿٣٩﴾

Is He not, then, able to bring the dead back to life? (40)

أَلَيْسَ ذَٰلِكَ بِقَٰدِرٍ عَلَىٰٓ أَن يُحْـِۧىَ ٱلْمَوْتَىٰ ﴿٤٠﴾

Self-Reproaching Soul

> *I need not swear by the Day of Resurrection and I need not swear by the self-reproaching soul! Does man think that We will not put his bones together again? Yes, indeed! We are able to put in perfect order his very fingertips! Yet man wants to deny what lies ahead of him. He asks: 'When will this Day of Resurrection be?' When the sight is dazzled and the moon eclipsed, when the sun and the moon are brought together, on that day man will say: 'Where to flee?' But no! There is no refuge. On that day, to your Lord all shall return. Man will be told on that day all that he put forward and all that he put back. Man will be a witness against himself, even though he may put up his excuses.* (Verses 1–15)

The *sūrah* starts with a reference to making an oath, but then decides not to make it. This has a deeper effect than a straightforward oath, and this is what is intended. Indeed, a more literal rendering would be: 'I do not swear by…' When this has been stated, the truths of the resurrection and self-reproaching soul appear in view.

There is much discussion of resurrection in the *sūrah*. As for the self-reproaching soul, various reports explain this. Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī says: "You will always find a believer questioning himself: 'What did I mean by this word? What did I eat this food for? What do I mean by speaking to myself thus?' A transgressor will go on never blaming himself." Al-Ḥasan says: "Every single soul in the heavens and earth will be blaming himself on the Day of Judgement." 'Ikrimah says: "It is the soul that blames itself for good and bad things, saying: if only I did this or that." Sa'īd ibn Jubayr said the same. Ibn 'Abbās says: "It is always blaming." He also says: "It is often blaming, much criticized." Mujāhid says: "It regrets what has passed and blames for it." Qatādah says: "It is the one tending towards evil." Jarīr says: "All these definitions are in practically the same vein. However, what is closer to the apparent meaning of the Qur'ānic statement is to say that it is the soul that blames a person for whatever he does, good or bad, and regrets what has passed." For our self, we prefer the first definition stated by al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī.

Such a pious, self-reproaching soul, one that fears God's punishment, and is always cautious, looking around, reviewing its actions, identifying

what it desires, making sure not to cheat itself, is certainly so honoured by God as to warrant mention alongside the Day of Resurrection. It is the opposite of the soul of one who wants to indulge in sin undeterred; who lies, turns away from the truth and then returns to his people full of arrogance, never taking stock of his actions and paying no heed to the truth.

"*I need not swear by the Day of Resurrection and I need not swear by the self-reproaching soul!*" (Verses 1–2) What is at the centre of this opening is the arrival of the Day of Resurrection, but when the oath is left aside, the *sūrah* does not mention the subject of that oath further. Instead, it picks it up in another form, as if to start a discourse having alerted our minds to it with this clear opening: "*Does man think that We will not put his bones together again? Yes, indeed! We are able to put in perfect order his very fingertips!*" (Verses 3–4)

The essential difficulty for the unbelievers was that they could not imagine that bones becoming dust and being swallowed by the earth could then be gathered together again to bring a human being back to life. This is also most probably true of some people today! The *sūrah* responds to this sort of thinking, confirming that putting everyone's bones back together will assuredly take place: "*Yes, indeed! We are able to put in perfect order his very fingertips!*" (Verse 4) The *sūrah* reasserts this process of putting bones back together by stating something more complex, which is to put fingertips in their respective positions, just as they were in life. This implies that man will be brought back to life, with every little detail or small aspect of his physique put back in perfect order. Nothing is lost, however small!

This reconfirmation is enough here. Towards the end of the *sūrah*, we have another proof derived from the fact of man's first creation. Here, however, the *sūrah* exposes the mental flaw leading to this sort of thinking that cannot conceive of bones being put back together. Man simply wants to persist in his denial so that he goes on the loose, with nothing to check or restrain his march. He does not want to face any reckoning or requital. Therefore, he expects no resurrection and no answerability: "*Yet man wants to deny what lies ahead of him. He asks: 'When will this Day of Resurrection be?'*" (Verses 5–6) This question is stated in the Arabic with the interrogative pronoun *ayyāna*, which

adds to the normal equivalent of 'when', which is *ayna*, the doubling of the '*y*' sound and a long '*a*'; a form that suggests the improbability of happening. This is in line with the desire of the questioner to run loose and continue with his sinful ways, undeterred by any thought of the hereafter. Indeed, the hereafter often acts as a restraint checking the desire to indulge in sin. Now this person tries to remove this restraint so that he can go ahead with sinful practices undeterred.

The answer that comes is swift, decisive, maintains a fast beat and uses hard-hitting words. It draws a scene of the Day of Resurrection in which human senses and feelings combine with celestial images to produce an awesome effect: "*When the sight is dazzled and the moon eclipsed, when the sun and the moon are brought together, on that day man will say: 'Where to flee?'*" (Verses 7–10) The sight is very swiftly distracted here and there, like lightning, and the moon is eclipsed and no longer reflects any light, while the sun and the moon are brought together after they have long been parted. Their familiar operation is disrupted since the entire celestial system, known for its accuracy of movement, is no longer operating. In the midst of all this upheaval, man stands terrified, asking, 'Where to flee?' The very question imparts a feeling of fear and utter panic. Man looks lost, wherever he turns his eyes he sees nothing but a blocked way.

There is no refuge or protection. No one can avert God's power and punishment, since all return to Him and there is no hiding place to seek other than the one He determines: "*But no! There is no refuge. On that day, to your Lord all shall return.*" (Verses 11–12) So what man has desired, hoping to be able to continue with his erring ways, fearing neither reckoning nor requital, is not what happens. On the contrary, everything will be reckoned, and he will be reminded of anything he may have forgotten. It will all be brought before him so that he faces his fair requital: "*Man will be told on that day all that he put forward and all that he put back.*" (Verse 13) He will be told of what he did before his death, as also what effects his actions produced after his death, whether good or evil. Some actions produce long-lasting effects, and these effects are added to the account of the person who performed them.

Whatever excuses man may try to put forward, none will be accepted. He is responsible for himself, and it is his duty to bring himself to divine

guidance. When he let himself sink into evil, only he himself can be answerable for this: "*Man will be a witness against himself, even though he may put up his excuses.*" (Verses 14–15)

It is worth noting here that every expression in the *sūrah* thus far is short and quick: the verses, the endings, the rhythm, the images and the reckoning process. This appears to be a response to man's attempt to disregard the whole idea of the Day of Reckoning and to think that it is too far off.

God's Guarantee

Then come the four verses giving the Prophet special instruction as regards the way he received Qur'ānic revelations:

> *Do not move your tongue repeating its words in haste. We shall see to its collection and recitation. When We recite it, follow its recitation. Then it will be for Us to make its meaning clear.* (Verses 16–19)

In addition to what we have already said about these four verses in the Prologue, we note that God takes all responsibility for the Qur'ān: its revelation, preservation, collection and explanation. All this is undertaken by none other than God Almighty. The Prophet's role is no more than to receive and deliver it. We also note here how the Prophet was so eager and keen to fully understand what was being revealed to him, taking it most seriously, fearing to forget a phrase or a word. Hence why he repeated the words after the Angel Gabriel recited them to him, to make sure that he had not omitted any of it. The fact that this is recorded in the Qur'ān itself further emphasizes what we have just said.

Opposite Positions

The *sūrah* now reminds the unbelievers of their love of this present world, which is their main concern, and their disregard of the hereafter. It shows them the state in which they will end up in the life to come in a highly inspiring image:

> *Yet you love this fleeting life, and give no thought to the life to come. Some faces will on that day be radiant with happiness, looking towards their Lord; and some faces will on that day be overcast with despair, realizing that a great calamity is about to befall them.* (Verses 20–25)

The first thing we notice, which adds to the harmony of style, is that this life is described at this point as '*fleeting*'. This not only stresses the short duration of this present life, which is the intended meaning, but also provides an element of harmony between these connotations and those of the preceding verses speaking of the Prophet as he repeated the words of the Qur'ān. In both, haste is a common feature. It also appears to be a feature of mankind in this present world.

These last quoted verses paint two contrasting images: "*Some faces will on that day be radiant with happiness, looking towards their Lord.*" (Verses 22–23) This is a very quick reference to a situation no words can describe and no imagination can fully understand. Those people are promised a kind of happiness that is unlike any other. Indeed, heaven and all the happiness it includes appear too small by comparison. These beaming faces are so radiant with happiness because they are looking towards their Lord! They are looking towards God! How sublime! What pure, perfect and absolute happiness!

Sometimes man's soul looks briefly at an aspect of beauty God has placed in the universe or within man. It may see this in the full moon, the still night, the breaking dawn, the stretching shadow, the bustling sea, the endless desert, the blossoming garden, the happy face, the noble heart, the unshakable faith, the unwavering patience or many other manifestations of beauty in this world. Looking at such beauty, man feels ecstatic, flowing with happiness, flying into a world of light and purity. All adversity seems to shrink and disappear. So how will man's soul feel when he looks, not at the beauty of God's creation, but at God's own beauty? This is a position that needs both help and reassurance from God so that man can steady himself and begin to enjoy such indescribable happiness: "*Some faces will on that day be radiant with happiness, looking towards their Lord.*" (Verses 22–23) How could these faces be anything but radiant and beaming when they are looking towards their Lord and His beauty?

We experience a feeling of happiness that rises from our hearts and gives our faces a beaming look, simply because we see the beauty of something God has created: a bright face, a lovely flower, a spread-out wing, a noble soul or a kindly deed. What feelings, then, will overwhelm us when we look at the beauty of perfection, and when we are free of all life's concerns that may distract us from appreciating such beauty? When we speak of 'life's concerns' we do not mean only in the world around us but also in terms of our own shortcomings and needs.

How do those happy people look; with what organ and by what means? These are questions that do not even occur to a heart touched by the happiness that this Qur'ānic statement radiates into a believer's soul. Why, then, do some people deprive their souls from enjoying this light that overflows with happiness and joy? Why do they, instead, get involved in futile arguments about an abstract that human minds, restricted as they are by their familiar world, cannot fathom? Only man's release from the shackles of his worldly existence will give him the hope of facing the absolute truth on the Day of Resurrection. Without such release, man cannot even imagine what facing that truth will be like.

This means that the seemingly endless arguments the Mu'tazilah entered into with their Sunnī theological opponents and other philosophers were absolutely futile, leading nowhere. They argued about the nature of 'the look' and 'the sight' on that day. They used earthly standards, speaking about encumbered man, man restricted by what he knows when on earth, and so looked at the whole question with faculties that are essentially limited in scope.

The very import of the words is restricted by what our finite minds and imaginations understand. If our minds are freed from such restrictions, the very words may acquire different meanings. Words are only symbols, and what they symbolize differs in accordance with man's thoughts and concepts. When man's powers and faculties change, his concepts change and, consequently, the significance of words change. In our life on earth, we deal with these symbols according to our power. Why, then, should we argue about something when we are not even sure about the significance of the words expressing it? Let us, then, look up to this absolutely serene happiness and pure joy which we feel when we try, as we can, to imagine that position. Let our souls revel in that

happiness, for the mere looking up to such happiness is a great blessing of far-reaching dimensions.

"*And some faces will on that day be overcast with despair, realizing that a great calamity is about to befall them.*" (Verses 24–25) These are faces looking absolutely grim, with their sins and misdeeds casting a dark shadow over them. Their expectation of an impending calamity that crushes their very backbones weighs heavily on them and heightens their immense sorrow. How dreadful and ghastly they look!

Such is the life to come which they ignore, preferring to indulge in this life of fleeting pleasures. They love this life despite having ahead of them that day which brings widely different fates.

The Scene of Death

The scenes painted so far of the Day of Judgement and its great upheavals and divergent fates derive their effect from the truth they represent and the Qur'ān's own powerful style, bringing them alive before us. The *sūrah* now comes closer and closer so as to present a scene of something that occurs all the time. Indeed, people encounter this most clearly at every moment in their lives. It is the scene of death that overtakes every living soul. No one can evade or escape death, which separates a person from his loved ones. Death moves along its course, uninterrupted by anything. It does not respond to an impassioned appeal, an outcry of grief, a fervent desire or a seizure of panic. It takes the most powerful giants as easily as it takes the weakest dwarfs, and overcomes tyrants in the same way as it overcomes the oppressed. Mankind have no way to prevent death, yet they do not consider the great power that deals it:

> *Yet when the departing soul comes up to the throat, when it is said, 'Can any charmer [do something now]?' When he knows it is the final parting, and one leg will be joined with another, to your Lord he will on that day be driven.* (Verses 26–30)

This is the scene of approaching death, presented to people by the Qur'ān as if it is happening now. It comes out from within the words, just like a picture comes out of a painter's brush.

"*Yet when the departing soul comes up to the throat.*" (Verse 26) At this point the dying person is in his last throes, with distress all around. Those present look everywhere, trying to think of something or some means to save the one suffering this distress: "*when it is said, 'Can any charmer [do something now]?'*" (Verse 27) Could a charm possibly be of any use? The suffering one is writhing with pain, "*and one leg will be joined with another.*" (Verse 29) All means are of no use. The road ahead becomes clear; it is the road every living being will eventually have to walk: "*To your Lord he will on that day be driven.*" (Verse 30) The scene almost moves in front of us and almost talks. Every verse draws a movement, and the image of approaching death is clearly visible spreading impassioned feelings of loss and panic, before facing the bitter, hard truth no one can escape from. The inevitable end then clearly appears: "*To your Lord he will on that day be driven.*" (Verse 30) The curtains are drawn over this distressing scene, leaving a distinct image in our eyes, prominent feelings in our hearts and a clear sense of grimness in the air.

Arrogant Rejection

By contrast, we have an image of those bent on denying the truth. They do not prepare for the inevitable end by doing something in obedience of God. Rather, they arrogantly indulge in disobedience and sin:

> *He neither believed nor prayed, but denied the truth and turned away, then he went back to his people full of arrogance.* (Verses 31–33)

It is reported that these verses refer to a particular person, Abū Jahl 'Amr ibn Hishām, who used to visit the Prophet sometimes and listen to the Qur'ān. He would then go away, refusing to believe. In fact, he was neither polite nor fearful of God. He would continue to hurt the Prophet by what he said, and would try to turn people away from Islam. He would also take pride in such actions, treating his evil deeds as something to be proud of. The Qur'ān derides his attitude. In its description of his arrogant movements, it invites the listeners' scorn.

Yet there are many like Abū Jahl whom the message of Islam faces. They listen but turn away. They are inventive in their opposition to the word of truth, pouring harm on its advocates, working out evil schemes and feeling proud of their evil deeds and of the corruption they spread on earth. Hence, the Qur'ān issues a clear threat to such people:

> *Your doom, man, comes nearer and nearer, and ever nearer and nearer.* (Verses 34–35)

The *sūrah* uses here an idiom, *awlā laka fa 'awlā*, which implies a strong threat and repeats it twice. Hence the translation expresses the implied meaning. On one occasion, the Prophet held Abū Jahl by the scruff of his neck and used this expression as it occurs in the *sūrah*. Abū Jahl said: "Are you threatening me, Muḥammad? By God, neither you nor your Lord can do anything to me. I am the most powerful man ever to walk in between these hills." When the Battle of Badr took place, God killed him by the hands of Muḥammad's followers. Before him, Pharaoh said to the chiefs of his people: "*Nobles! I know of no deity that you could have other than myself.*" (28: 38) He also said: "*My people, is the kingdom of Egypt not mine, with all these rivers flowing at my feet?*" (43: 51) Yet God smote him down, drowned him.

The history of the divine message is full of people who forgot God and His power, of those who feel their own power, relying on tribes, forces and authority, thinking that all these will give them protection. Then such people are taken away like a fly or a mosquito. Remember then, when the time of death comes it cannot be put forward or backward by even a fraction of a second.

Can it be Without Purpose?

As the *sūrah* draws to its conclusion, it presents another truth from this world that carries a clear pointer to God's design of human life as also to the life to come:

> *Does man think that he will be left without purpose? Was he not a mere drop of emitted sperm? It then became a clinging cell mass, and*

> *then God created and shaped it, fashioning out of it the two sexes, male and female. Is He not, then, able to bring the dead back to life?* (Verses 36–40)

This last section strikes powerful notes and points to great truths, which those who were addressed by the Qur'ān at the time of its revelations could never imagine. The first of these refers to the deliberate design and planning in man's life: "*Does man think that he will be left without purpose?*" (Verse 36) Those people used to think that life was merely a process that takes place, having neither cause nor goal. Women get pregnant and give birth, and graves take the dead away! In between, there is nothing other than idle play, putting on some adornments, competing for good things, and enjoyment that is not much different from animals. To think that it all goes according to an elaborate law, serving a definite goal and purpose; that man's arrival in this life is according to a deliberate will and a set plan; that it all ends with accountability and requital, and that the journey of life is a test before the final requital was far beyond people's thoughts. Few could recognize in all this the wisdom of God, that He does everything for a clear purpose and towards a pre-willed end.

What distinguishes man from animals is man's recognition of the link between time, events and objectives and that human life has a definite purpose linked to that of the universe around him. The greater and broader this feeling is in man's consciousness and the more refined is his concept of the law that links things and events, the higher he rises in his humanity. Thus, he does not live his life one minute or one event after another. On the contrary, time, place, the past, present and future are all connected in his consciousness. They are all related to the existence of the great universe and its laws. These are the result of a higher will that creates, plans and designs. This higher will does not create people and leave them to a life without purpose.

The Qur'ān put this profound concept in people's minds so long ago. It was a great departure from the concepts that prevailed at the time. It remains greatly removed from all concepts about the universe that philosophers of olden and modern times have advanced.

"*Does man think that he will be left without purpose?*" (Verse 36) This is a fine touch, which the Qur'ān uses to alert the human mind to think and reflect, looking at bonds, goals, causes and effects that link his existence to that of the universe and to the will that conducts everything in that universe.

In a clear and simple manner, the *sūrah* cites clear evidence confirming that man will not be left without purpose. These are taken from man's first origins: "*Was he not a mere drop of emitted sperm? It then became a clinging cell mass, and then God created and shaped it, fashioning out of it the two sexes, male and female.*" (Verses 37–39) What is man? How does he come into existence? What are his origins? How does he grow into his present status? What journey did he make before arriving on this planet? Was he not a mere drop of a certain emitted fluid? Did not this one-celled drop transform into a cell mass that clung to the wall of the uterus to survive and be nourished? Who guided it to do this, and who gave it this ability?

Then again, who made out of it an embryo with perfectly shaped organs, composed of millions and millions of cells, when it only originated as a single cell that fertilized an egg? Its journey from one cell to a fully-shaped embryo is far longer than man's journey from birth to death. The changes and transformations it goes through during the embryonic journey are much more varied and wider than all that a man encounters through his life journey from the moment of birth to the moment of death. Who guided his long eventful journey while he was a helpless creature without an intellect, perception and experience?

Ultimately, who brought out of the single cell the two types, male and female? What will did this cell have to develop into a male while the other developed into a female? Or, who indeed can claim to have intervened to guide their different routes to make this choice in the dark depths of the uterus?

There is no escape! Everyone admits the presence of the gentle hand that guided the emitted drop of fluid along its long way and brought it to its final shape, according to an elaborate plan: "*Fashioning out of it the two sexes, male and female.*" (Verse 39)

As this truth imposes itself on our human senses, the *sūrah* concludes with a note that brings together the truths outlined through its verses:

"*Is He not, then, able to bring the dead back to life?*" (Verse 40) Yes, indeed! God Almighty is able to bring the dead back to life. Yes, indeed! Limitless is He in His glory, God is able to bring about the second life. Yes, without doubt. Man can say nothing to this, other than submit to its truth.

Thus the *sūrah* concludes, with such a powerful and decisive note that allows the truth of human existence and the elaborate planning behind it to fill our minds.

SŪRAH 76

Al-Insān

(Man)

Prologue

Some reports suggest that this *sūrah* was revealed in Madīnah, but it is a Makkan revelation. Its Makkan character is indeed very obvious considering its subject matter, its flow and other characteristics. Hence, we give more credence to those reports stating its revelation in Makkah. In fact, there are indications in the way it runs suggesting that it was among the earlier *sūrahs* to be revealed in Makkah. We may cite for example the detailed images of happiness and torment in the life to come, the directive given to the Prophet to remain patient, awaiting his Lord's judgement, and not to obey any sinner or unbeliever from among them. These are the things Makkan revelations always emphasized, particularly when the persecution of the advocates of the Islamic message was becoming fierce. Moreover, the Prophet is encouraged to hold firmly to the truth he has been given, allowing the unbelievers respite but not to incline to or listen to them. Such directives are found in *Sūrahs* 68, 73 and 74 in this volume. These directives are similar to the ones found in this *sūrah*. Therefore, the possibility that it was revealed in Madīnah is remote and better discounted.

In totality, the *sūrah* is a calm address encouraging people to turn to God, obey Him, seek His pleasure, remember His favours, work to avoid His punishment, maintain alertness to the test He puts His servants to

and understand His wisdom in creation, bestowing favours, testing and giving the unbelievers respite.

The *sūrah* begins with an inspiring touch, asking the question: where was man before coming into this life? Who gave him his existence? Who gave him the position he occupies in this life after he had none: "*Was there not a period of time when man was not yet something to be thought of?*" (Verse 1) This is followed by a second touch speaking about man's origins and God's wisdom manifested in his creation and His giving him his energies and faculties: "*We have created man from a drop of mingled fluid, so that We might try him. Therefore, we have endowed him with hearing and sight.*" (Verse 2) The third touch speaks of guiding man to the right way, giving him help to go along this way before leaving him to choose the way he wants to go and the fate he wants to end up with: "*We have shown him the way, [giving him the choice] to be thankful or ungrateful.*" (Verse 3) These three touches set the human heart thinking deeply, glancing back and casting a look forward, and then reflecting before choosing which way to go. Then the *sūrah* gives clear advice to man as he stands at the crossroads, warning him against taking the way leading to hell and encouraging him in every way to take the way to heaven, pointing to the great variety of pleasure that awaits him there: "*For the unbelievers, we have prepared chains and shackles, and a blazing fire. The righteous shall drink from a cup mixed with* kāfūr, *a fountain where God's servants shall drink, making it flow in abundance.*" (Verses 4–6)

Before completing its description of what believers will enjoy, the *sūrah* now draws a sketch showing the features of those righteous people. In so doing, it uses some fine words and expressions that are in perfect harmony with the splendid bliss these people enjoy in heaven: "*They are the ones who fulfil their vows and stand in awe of a day of woes that fly far and wide, who give food – though they need it themselves – to the needy, the orphan and the captive, [saying within themselves,] 'We feed you for the sake of God alone. We desire neither recompense from you, nor thanks. We fear the day of our Lord: a bleak, distressful day.*" (Verses 7–10)

The *sūrah* then presents the reward which will be given to these people who willingly attend to difficult duties, who fear the bleak, grim day, the generous who feed others despite themselves being in need, and who only seek God's pleasure, hoping for no reward from anyone else. As the

sūrah presents this, we find that it is a reward of security, happiness and perfect enjoyment: "*God will save them from the woes of that day, and will grant them radiance and joy, and will reward them for their patience in adversity with a garden and [garments of] silk. They will recline there on soft couches, feeling neither burning sun nor severe cold. Its shades will come low over them, and its clusters of fruit will hang low, within easy reach. They will be served with silver plates and goblets that seem to be crystal, crystal-clear, but made of silver, the measure of which they are the ones to determine. They will be given to drink of a cup flavoured with ginger, from a spring there called* Salsabīl. *They will be waited upon by immortal youths. If you see them, you would think they were scattered pearls. If you were to look around, you would see only bliss and a vast kingdom. They shall be arrayed in garments of fine green silk and brocade; and adorned with bracelets of silver. And their Lord will give them a most pure drink. This is a reward for you. Your endeavours are well appreciated.* (Verses 11–22)

The *sūrah* then addresses the Prophet encouraging him to stand firm in the face of those who turn away, persist in disbelief and deny the truth. He is directed to remain patient in the face of all this adversity and to await God's judgement. He should maintain his tie with his Lord, deriving strength from Him whenever he feels that the road he has to travel is too long: "*It is We who have bestowed the Qur'ān upon you by gradual revelation. Await, then, your Lord's judgement in all patience, and pay no heed to any of these sinners and unbelievers. Remember your Lord's name morning and evening. At night prostrate yourself before Him, and extol His limitless glory throughout the long night.*" (Verses 23–26)

In conclusion, the *sūrah* reminds the unbelievers of the heavy day that they do not reckon with. This is the day feared by the righteous who are keen to guard against its punishment. It tells them that they represent no serious issue to God who gave them all the power they have and is able to replace them with others. He bestows His favours on them in fulfilment of His wish to put people to the test. The *sūrah* ends with a brief mention of the results of this test: "*These people love the fleeting life, and leave behind them a day that will be heavy. It is We who have created them and strengthened their constitution. If it be Our will, We can replace them entirely with others of their kind. This is but a reminder. Let him who will, take the way to his Lord. Yet you cannot will*

except by the will of God. God is indeed All-Knowing, Wise. He admits to His grace whoever He will, but for the wrongdoers He has prepared grievous suffering." (Verses 27–31)

The *sūrah* begins with a reminder of how man comes into existence and God's design in so originating him to undergo a test, and it concludes with the outcome of this test, as determined by God at the point of origination. Thus, the beginning and the end point to the deliberate and elaborate planning of life. Man performs very badly if he remains heedless, unaware of the purpose of his life when he is being put to a test, and has been equipped with the faculties that help him pass this test.

Between the opening and close, the *sūrah* gives the longest, or perhaps one of the longest if we take *Sūrah* 56 into account, description of the blessings granted to the people of heaven. These are mostly material, but they are coupled with God's acceptance and the honour He grants. The fact that this description is so detailed points to its being a Makkan revelation, because the addressees were newcomers to Islam, having lived in *jāhiliyyah*, or ignorance. They were fond of material luxuries. They would be very impressed with its prospect. There will always be people who store much by such luxuries. God knows His creation best, and knows what suits them and what has a deep effect on their hearts and minds. There is definitely a higher and more refined type of happiness and joy, such as the one mentioned in the preceding *sūrah*, The Resurrection: "*Some faces will on that day be radiant with happiness, looking towards their Lord.*" (75: 22–23)

Al-Insān (Man)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

Was there not a period of time when man was not yet something to be thought of? (1)

هَلْ أَتَىٰ عَلَى ٱلْإِنسَٰنِ حِينٌ مِّنَ ٱلدَّهْرِ لَمْ يَكُن شَيْـًٔا مَّذْكُورًا ١

We have created man from a drop of mingled fluid, so that We might try him. Therefore, we have endowed him with hearing and sight. (2)

إِنَّا خَلَقْنَا ٱلْإِنسَٰنَ مِن نُّطْفَةٍ أَمْشَاجٍ نَّبْتَلِيهِ فَجَعَلْنَٰهُ سَمِيعًۢا بَصِيرًا ٢

We have shown him the way, [giving him the choice] to be thankful or ungrateful. (3)

إِنَّا هَدَيْنَٰهُ ٱلسَّبِيلَ إِمَّا شَاكِرًا وَإِمَّا كَفُورًا ٣

For the unbelievers, we have prepared chains and shackles, and a blazing fire. (4)

إِنَّآ أَعْتَدْنَا لِلْكَٰفِرِينَ سَلَٰسِلَا۟ وَأَغْلَٰلًا وَسَعِيرًا ٤

The righteous shall drink from a cup mixed with *kāfūr*, (5)

إِنَّ ٱلْأَبْرَارَ يَشْرَبُونَ مِن كَأْسٍ كَانَ مِزَاجُهَا كَافُورًا ٥

a fountain where God's servants shall drink, making it flow in abundance. (6)

عَيْنًا يَشْرَبُ بِهَا عِبَادُ ٱللَّهِ يُفَجِّرُونَهَا تَفْجِيرًا ٦

They are the ones who fulfil their vows and stand in awe of a day of woes that fly far and wide, (7)

يُوفُونَ بِٱلنَّذْرِ وَيَخَافُونَ يَوْمًا كَانَ شَرُّهُۥ مُسْتَطِيرًا ٧

who give food – though they need it themselves – to the needy, the orphan and the captive, (8)

وَيُطْعِمُونَ ٱلطَّعَامَ عَلَىٰ حُبِّهِۦ مِسْكِينًا
وَيَتِيمًا وَأَسِيرًا ﴿٨﴾

[saying within themselves,] 'We feed you for the sake of God alone. We desire neither recompense from you, nor thanks. (9)

إِنَّمَا نُطْعِمُكُمْ لِوَجْهِ ٱللَّهِ لَا نُرِيدُ مِنكُمْ جَزَآءً
وَلَا شُكُورًا ﴿٩﴾

We fear the day of our Lord: a bleak, distressful day.' (10)

إِنَّا نَخَافُ مِن رَّبِّنَا يَوْمًا عَبُوسًا قَمْطَرِيرًا ﴿١٠﴾

God will save them from the woes of that day, and will grant them radiance and joy, (11)

فَوَقَىٰهُمُ ٱللَّهُ شَرَّ ذَٰلِكَ ٱلْيَوْمِ وَلَقَّىٰهُمْ نَضْرَةً
وَسُرُورًا ﴿١١﴾

and will reward them for their patience in adversity with a garden and [garments of] silk. (12)

وَجَزَىٰهُم بِمَا صَبَرُوا۟ جَنَّةً وَحَرِيرًا ﴿١٢﴾

They will recline there on soft couches, feeling neither burning sun nor severe cold. (13)

مُّتَّكِـِٔينَ فِيهَا عَلَى ٱلْأَرَآئِكِ ۖ لَا يَرَوْنَ فِيهَا
شَمْسًا وَلَا زَمْهَرِيرًا ﴿١٣﴾

Its shades will come low over them, and its clusters of fruit will hang low, within easy reach. (14)

وَدَانِيَةً عَلَيْهِمْ ظِلَٰلُهَا وَذُلِّلَتْ قُطُوفُهَا
تَذْلِيلًا ﴿١٤﴾

They will be served with silver plates and goblets that seem to be crystal, (15)

وَيُطَافُ عَلَيْهِم بِـَٔانِيَةٍ مِّن فِضَّةٍ وَأَكْوَابٍ
كَانَتْ قَوَارِيرَا۠ ﴿١٥﴾

قَوَارِيرَا۟ مِن فِضَّةٍ قَدَّرُوهَا تَقْدِيرًا ﴿١٦﴾

crystal-clear, but made of silver, the measure of which they are the ones to determine. (16)

وَيُسْقَوْنَ فِيهَا كَأْسًا كَانَ مِزَاجُهَا زَنجَبِيلًا ﴿١٧﴾

They will be given to drink of a cup flavoured with ginger, (17)

عَيْنًا فِيهَا تُسَمَّىٰ سَلْسَبِيلًا ﴿١٨﴾

from a spring there called *Salsabīl.* (18)

وَيَطُوفُ عَلَيْهِمْ وِلْدَٰنٌ مُّخَلَّدُونَ إِذَا رَأَيْتَهُمْ
حَسِبْتَهُمْ لُؤْلُؤًا مَّنثُورًا ﴿١٩﴾

They will be waited upon by immortal youths. If you see them, you would think they were scattered pearls. (19)

وَإِذَا رَأَيْتَ ثَمَّ رَأَيْتَ نَعِيمًا وَمُلْكًا كَبِيرًا ﴿٢٠﴾

If you were to look around, you would see only bliss and a vast kingdom. (20)

عَٰلِيَهُمْ ثِيَابُ سُندُسٍ خُضْرٌ وَإِسْتَبْرَقٌ ۖ
وَحُلُّوٓا۟ أَسَاوِرَ مِن فِضَّةٍ وَسَقَىٰهُمْ رَبُّهُمْ
شَرَابًا طَهُورًا ﴿٢١﴾

They shall be arrayed in garments of fine green silk and brocade; and adorned with bracelets of silver. And their Lord will give them a most pure drink. (21)

إِنَّ هَٰذَا كَانَ لَكُمْ جَزَآءً وَكَانَ سَعْيُكُم
مَّشْكُورًا ﴿٢٢﴾

This is a reward for you. Your endeavours are well appreciated. (22)

إِنَّا نَحْنُ نَزَّلْنَا عَلَيْكَ ٱلْقُرْءَانَ تَنزِيلًا ﴿٢٣﴾

It is We who have bestowed the Qur'ān upon you by gradual revelation. (23)

فَٱصۡبِرۡ لِحُكۡمِ رَبِّكَ وَلَا تُطِعۡ مِنۡهُمۡ ءَاثِمًا أَوۡ كَفُورٗا ﴿٢٤﴾

Await, then, your Lord's judgement in all patience, and pay no heed to any of these sinners and unbelievers. (24)

وَٱذۡكُرِ ٱسۡمَ رَبِّكَ بُكۡرَةٗ وَأَصِيلٗا ﴿٢٥﴾

Remember your Lord's name morning and evening. (25)

وَمِنَ ٱلَّيۡلِ فَٱسۡجُدۡ لَهُۥ وَسَبِّحۡهُ لَيۡلٗا طَوِيلًا ﴿٢٦﴾

At night prostrate yourself before Him, and extol His limitless glory throughout the long night. (26)

إِنَّ هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ يُحِبُّونَ ٱلۡعَاجِلَةَ وَيَذَرُونَ وَرَآءَهُمۡ يَوۡمٗا ثَقِيلٗا ﴿٢٧﴾

These people love the fleeting life, and leave behind them a day that will be heavy. (27)

نَّحۡنُ خَلَقۡنَٰهُمۡ وَشَدَدۡنَآ أَسۡرَهُمۡۖ وَإِذَا شِئۡنَا بَدَّلۡنَآ أَمۡثَٰلَهُمۡ تَبۡدِيلًا ﴿٢٨﴾

It is We who have created them and strengthened their constitution. If it be Our will, We can replace them entirely with others of their kind. (28)

إِنَّ هَٰذِهِۦ تَذۡكِرَةٞۖ فَمَن شَآءَ ٱتَّخَذَ إِلَىٰ رَبِّهِۦ سَبِيلٗا ﴿٢٩﴾

This is but a reminder. Let him who will, take the way to his Lord. (29)

وَمَا تَشَآءُونَ إِلَّآ أَن يَشَآءَ ٱللَّهُۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ كَانَ عَلِيمًا حَكِيمٗا ﴿٣٠﴾

Yet you cannot will except by the will of God. God is indeed All-Knowing, Wise. (30)

يُدۡخِلُ مَن يَشَآءُ فِي رَحۡمَتِهِۦۚ وَٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ أَعَدَّ لَهُمۡ عَذَابًا أَلِيمَۢا ﴿٣١﴾

He admits to His grace whoever He will, but for the wrongdoers He has prepared grievous suffering. (31)

When Man Was Nothing

> *Was there not a period of time when man was not yet something to be thought of? We have created man from a drop of mingled fluid, so that We might try him. Therefore, we have endowed him with hearing and sight. We have shown him the way, [giving him the choice] to be thankful or ungrateful.* (Verses 1–3)

This question with which the *sūrah* opens signifies a statement, but it is phrased in this way so that man should ask himself: 'Am I not aware that there was a period of time when I was nothing to be thought of?' This should lead to further questioning: should he not reflect on this fact? Should not such reflection guide him to how he was ushered in on life's stage where lights were focused on him to make of him a creature of note? The interrogative form in this instance facilitates some fine thoughts, encouraging us to reflect further.

One point of reflection takes us to the stage before man comes into existence. What was the universe like before man's advent? Man is so full of himself that he tends to forget that the universe was there long, long before he was. Perhaps the universe never expected that a new creature, man, would ever come into existence and certainly not until God willed it to so happen.

Another point takes us to the moment when human existence first began. Our imagination can paint different visions of that moment, known only to God, which added this new creature to the universe. Yet this was taken into account by God before it happened, with this new creature's role within the life of the universe well determined.

We should also reflect on how God's hand placed this new creature on life's stage, assigning a role to him and preparing him for it. Indeed, the same hand has linked his life to the life of the universe and provided the circumstances that ensure his survival and ability to fulfil his role easily. It monitors his progress, step by step.

Further reflections can be added, all coming from this short statement, culminating in the realization that the initiation, the life journey and the end are all determined according to an elaborate scheme.

Man's development and survival is also outlined in the *sūrah*: "*We have created man from a drop of mingled fluid, so that We might try him.*

Therefore, we have endowed him with hearing and sight." (Verse 2) The '*drop of mingled fluid*' perhaps refers to its formation when the man's sperm fertilizes the woman's egg. Alternatively, it may refer to the genes, or units of heredity, which distinguish the human species in the first place and transmit features from parent to offspring.

So, man is created from a drop of mingled fluid, neither by coincidence nor in idle play. He is created so that he can be tested. God certainly knows man, his test and the outcome of this test. What is meant here is that all this should come out on life's stage, producing its effects which cling to man so that he is requited in accordance with the outcome of his test. It is for this reason that God endowed man with the faculties of hearing and sight. He has been given these faculties of perception so that he can receive and respond, measure things and values, judging them and picking his choices. He will be rewarded in accordance with his choice.

In addition to knowledge and its acquisition, God gave man the ability to choose his way in life. He has shown him the way of guidance, i.e. the one that leads to Him, and left him to choose this way by himself or to stray from it, opting instead for one of the many other ways that do not lead to Him: "*We have shown him the way, [giving him the choice] to be thankful or ungrateful.*" (Verse 3) The verse refers to following divine guidance by being thankful, because the first thought that occurs to someone receiving guidance is to express gratitude for it. He is now aware that God has willed for him to be a creature of note after having being nothing to be thought of. God also granted him sight and hearing, as well as other faculties to be able to learn and acquire knowledge. He then provided him with guidance and left the choice to him. If such a person is a believer, then the first thought that occurs to him is to be thankful. If he does not give thanks, then he is certainly ungrateful.

With these three touches given at the opening of the *sūrah*, man realizes that there is a purpose behind his creation. He becomes aware that he is tied to a central point; that he is equipped with knowledge and is answerable for it; and that he is set a test and needs to pass it. In other words, his life on earth is a trial, not a period of idle play and neglect. These three short verses give him such a range to reflect upon. He acquires a very serious outlook on life and knows that the results of

the test will be announced once it is all over. Hence, how these verses change his vision in life and his feelings towards it and towards life values in general.

When the Test is Over

Now that the test has been put, and man has chosen one way or the other, what happens next? What awaits the unbelievers is briefly stated in one verse, because the general ambience of the *sūrah* is one of luxury, comfort and blessing. The torment prepared for the unbelievers is summed up: "*For the unbelievers, we have prepared chains and shackles, and a blazing fire.*" (Verse 4) They will have chains for their feet and shackles for their wrists, and then they will be cast into the blazing fire. The *sūrah* then quickly moves on to speak about the happiness of the other group:

> *The righteous shall drink from a cup mixed with* kāfūr, *a fountain where God's servants shall drink, making it flow in abundance.* (Verses 5–6)

This statement implies that the drink given to the righteous who are in heaven will be mixed with *kāfūr*, i.e. the calyx of sweet-smelling flowers, and that they will receive this drink in a cup filled from a fountain which flows in abundance. The Arabs used to mix their wine with *kāfūr*, or ginger, to give it a fine taste. Now, they know that their drink in heaven will be mixed with this and that it is plentiful. As for the nature of this drink, we understand that it is much finer and purer than any type of drink in this world, and that its enjoyment will be that much more enhanced. In our limited world, we cannot define the level or kind of enjoyment in the life to come. These are merely descriptions that give us an impression of what there is, because God knows that mankind cannot imagine what is beyond their world.

The *sūrah* calls the dwellers of heaven '*the righteous*' in the first verse, and describes them as '*God's servants*' in the second, honouring them first by acknowledging their moral standing and then referring to them as close to God. It then describes the qualities that earned them such a prize:

> *They are the ones who fulfil their vows and stand in awe of a day of woes that fly far and wide, who give food – though they need it themselves – to the needy, the orphan and the captive, [saying within themselves,] 'We feed you for the sake of God alone. We desire neither recompense from you, nor thanks. We fear the day of our Lord: a bleak, distressful day.'* (Verses 7–10)

This is a bright picture of people with sincere hearts, sincere in their determination to fulfil the duties required by their faith, compassionate to those who are less fortunate, putting them ahead of themselves, keen to earn God's pleasure and wary of incurring what may earn His punishment. Thus, they are God-fearing and serious in approaching their duties.

Sincere and Generous

"*They are the ones who fulfil their vows.*" (Verse 7) They thus fulfil what they intend to do of acts of worship and the duties they commit themselves to perform, taking the question of faith very seriously. They neither shirk their duty nor evade their commitment. The Qur'ānic statement is wider in scope than the literal meaning of *nadhr*, the Arabic word used here meaning pledge, vow, etc. "*And stand in awe of a day of woes that fly far and wide.*" (Verse 7) They realize what sort of day it will be. It is a day of woes and these woes can spread all over, affecting those who fall short of fulfilling their duties and those who are even worse, doing badly. Hence, they fear that some of these woes may apply to them. This fear is characteristic of people who are God-fearing, aware of the heavy duty placed on them, worried that they may not be up to its fulfilment however much they do of good deeds.

"*Who give food – though they need it themselves – to the needy, the orphan and the captive.*" (Verse 8) This statement describes their compassionate feelings, symbolized in their offering of food, which they need for themselves, to people who are less fortunate than themselves. In other words, they put such needy people, orphans and captives ahead of themselves, feeding them despite their own need of the food they give them. This picture suggests that the social environment that prevailed

in Makkah upon the advent of Islam was hard, lacking in compassion. Yet these Arabs paid generously when it was a question of competing for social standing. The righteous servants of God were like an oasis in this hard and barren desert: they gave food out of genuine compassion, sincerely dedicating their action to God: "*We feed you for the sake of God alone. We desire neither recompense from you, nor thanks. We fear the day of our Lord: a bleak, distressful day.*" (Verses 9–10) We see compassion overflowing from such hearts that seek God's pleasure, looking for no reward or praise from any creature. They do not hold up their favours in an attitude of conceit. They simply want to avoid the woes of a bleak and grim day, which they genuinely fear. The Prophet showed them the way to spare themselves its woes, as he said: "Save yourself from the fire by as little as half a date."[1]

Giving food to the needy in such a direct manner was at the time the proper expression of these people's own compassion and the most needed type of help. Ways and forms of charity may be completely different in other circumstances and social environments. What is important is the need to maintain such compassion towards others and the desire to do good only for God's sake, looking for no earthly recognition or reward.

Taxes may be regulated in society, and a portion of such taxes may be allocated for social security, ensuring that the poor are helped. However, this meets only one part of the Islamic objective that these verses refer to. Islam imposes the *zakāt* duty to fulfil this part of meeting the needs of the poor and the deprived. Islam, however, considers an equally important part of this objective, the feelings of those who give; in other words their desire to give elevates them to a high, noble standard. We must not belittle the importance of this objective. Yet some people seek to turn such high standards upside down, describing the Islamic system of *zakāt* and voluntary charity as ugly and claiming that it humiliates those

1. This *ḥadīth* urges kindness to the poor, making it clear that even a small act of kindness can be greatly rewarded. A person who has only one date and gives half of it to someone who is in dire need may have done enough to ensure his salvation on the Day of Judgement. Needless to say, a wealthy person needs to make his charity commensurate with his means. – Editor's note.

who take and corrupts those who give. Islam is a faith that sets a system to cultivate people's better feelings and sentiments. Kindly feelings and generosity refine those who are charitable and benefit the ones in need. They, thus, meet both aspects of the Islamic social objective. Hence, the Qur'ānic praise of this noble feeling.

> *God will save them from the woes of that day, and will grant them radiance and joy.* (Verse 11)

The *sūrah* mentions straightaway that they will be saved from whatever they feared on that day, thus reassuring them of their outcome while they are still in this life, believing in the Qur'ānic revelations they received. It also mentions that they will be blessed with radiant faces and joy in recompense for their hearty feelings towards others and their God-fearing attitude. The *sūrah* moves on to describe the comforts they will receive in heaven:

> *And will reward them for their patience in adversity with a garden and [garments of] silk. They will recline there on soft couches, feeling neither burning sun nor severe cold. Its shades will come low over them, and its clusters of fruit will hang low, within easy reach.* (Verses 12–14)

They will thus have the garden of heaven to dwell in, and garments of silk to wear. "*They will recline there on soft couches, feeling neither burning sun nor severe cold.*" (Verse 13) They are comfortable as they sit on these soft couches, in a pleasant atmosphere with no extreme temperatures. We should add here that this is a different world, one that has neither the sun we know, nor similar suns. "*Its shades will come low over them, and its clusters of fruit will hang low, within easy reach.*" (Verse 14) When shades come low and fruits are near, a feeling of ease and happiness spreads.

Such is the overall picture of heaven where God rewards His righteous servants who are given such a fine description of their status in this world. The *sūrah* adds more details of the luxuries they will have and the services provided for them:

They will be served with silver plates and goblets that seem to be crystal, crystal-clear, but made of silver, the measure of which they are the ones to determine. They will be given to drink of a cup flavoured with ginger, from a spring there called Salsabīl." (Verses 15–18)

As they sit on their soft couches in the pleasant shade, enjoying the fine atmosphere and delicious fruits, they find themselves served such pleasantries on silver plates and in silver goblets, yet these are as transparent as crystal, and so are unknown in this world. Moreover, these are of the right measure to give them maximum pleasure. Their drink is mixed with ginger, while it was previously mixed with *kāfūr*. These goblets are filled from a running spring called *Salsabīl*, a name implying a sweetly tasting drink.

To increase their enjoyment, those who bring them their plates and serve them their drinks are handsome youths whose young looks are permanent, unaffected by the passage of time, always looking like pearls: "*They will be waited upon by immortal youths. If you see them, you would think they were scattered pearls.*" (Verse 19) The *sūrah* then casts a general look at the scene and sums it up as well as its effect: "*If you were to look around, you would see only bliss and a vast kingdom.*" (Verse 20) That is how those servants of God, the righteous, live, in utter bliss and a vast kingdom. One aspect of all this bliss is highlighted, as though to justify this general description and further explain it: "*They shall be arrayed in garments of fine green silk and brocade; and adorned with bracelets of silver. And their Lord will give them a most pure drink.*" (Verse 21) All these luxuries and all this bliss they receive directly from God, which adds greatly to its value. A more welcoming gesture is then added: "*This is a reward for you. Your endeavours are well appreciated.*" (Verse 22)

Thus the presentation ends, having given us an inspiring and detailed picture of the bliss and luxury enjoyed by the dwellers of heaven. All this is given in contrast with the chains, shackles and blazing fire the unbelievers suffer. We, thus, see the two widely different ends to the two widely divergent ways.

No Compromise

The *sūrah* now looks at the situation of the unbelievers who persist in their opposition to the divine faith. These did not understand the nature of what the Prophet advocated. Therefore, they tried to compromise with him, hoping that he would stop, or at least forgo the part of it that most offended them. The last section of the *sūrah* deals with this situation against the backdrop of their seeking a compromise with the Prophet, persecuting his followers, turning people away from God's message and rejecting the way of goodness that ensures reward in heaven:

> *It is We who have bestowed the Qur'ān upon you by gradual revelation. Await, then, your Lord's judgement in all patience, and pay no heed to any of these sinners and unbelievers. Remember your Lord's name morning and evening. At night prostrate yourself before Him, and extol His limitless glory throughout the long night.* (Verses 23–26)

These four verses sum up an important principle of the Islamic faith, one which its advocates should fully understand and appreciate. They should study its effects within the human soul and in practical life.

God's Messenger faced the unbelievers directly, calling on them to believe in God's oneness. In advocating his message, the Prophet was not merely facing different beliefs. Had it been so, the case would have been much easier. The unbelievers' polytheistic beliefs were too flimsy and groundless to give them any solid ground to reject the clear, simple and logical Islamic faith. Instead, what led to their fierce and determined opposition, reported in history and recorded in the Qur'ān, was a host of circumstances and considerations. Social position as well as pride in prevailing values and what they might entail of material interest constituted the first factor motivating such people to hold tight to their flimsy and false beliefs, resisting those that were evidently true. Similarly, life under a system of *jāhiliyyah* allowed indulgence in every type of pleasure and gratification of every desire. Hence, people who were keen to indulge in these were expected to resist a faith that adopted a serious approach to morality and high values, stamping out all immoral and carnal practices. All these factors stood up against the Islamic message

when it was first advocated. They continue to stand up against it in every community and every generation. They represent the essential forces in the battle of faith, making it a hard-fought battle, requiring those fighting for faith to stand firm in the face of all such difficulties, willing to make great sacrifices. Therefore, advocates of Islam, regardless of place or time, must fully understand the truth summed up in these four verses and learn the circumstances leading to their revelations so that they apply to them too.

The Prophet received instructions from his Lord requiring him to warn his people. When he began carrying out his instructions, he was faced with those factors and circumstances that turned people away from his message and motivated them to persist with their own beliefs, knowing how flimsy and insupportable these were. They were very stubborn, and fought hard to preserve their beliefs, social order, personal interests and familiar practices and indulgences. They realized that the new faith threatened all these. Their defence of their system and old ways took several manifestations, starting with persecuting the few believers who responded to the new faith and trying to turn them back to the old way by force and physical torture. They also tried to give the new faith a bad image, making false accusations and spreading false rumours about it and the Messenger preaching it. They hoped that in this way they could prevent people from joining it. They thought that stopping people joining the new faith would be much easier than trying to turn them back from it after they had embraced and felt its truth.

At the same time, the unbelievers also tried different aspects of temptation, alongside the usual pressures and threats, to persuade the Prophet to meet them halfway. They wanted him to stop his onslaught against their beliefs, traditions and practices, and to work out some compromise, which would be acceptable to both parties. People normally try to work out a sort of *modus vivendi* when they have conflicting interests and claims. These same methods, or very similar ones, are often faced by the advocates of Islam.

It is true that, as a Messenger of God, the Prophet enjoyed God's protection and help, yet he was a human being facing difficult pressures and supported only by a small band of believers who were far weaker than their opponents. God was aware of all this. Therefore, He did not

abandon him, leaving him to face all this without support, or without marking the road ahead for him to follow. These four verses thus provide the essence of this much-needed support.

"*It is We who have bestowed the Qur'ān upon you by gradual revelation.*" (Verse 23) This is the first point, stating where this message comes from and who has assigned the duty of its advocacy. It comes from God, having no source other than Him. It is the message the Qur'ān outlines. It cannot be mixed up with anything that does not come from its pure source. It will incorporate nothing that comes from anywhere other than its own source. It will borrow nothing alien to its nature. Moreover, God, who revealed the Qur'ān and entrusted the message to its advocate, will not abandon him or leave him to his own devices when it is He who gave him the Qur'ān.

Yet falsehood behaves with insolence, and evil blows its own trumpet. Hardship is inflicted on the believers and they are subjected to persecution. The enemies of the divine faith possess the means to turn people away from it, and they use different tactics to achieve their purpose. They appear adamant about maintaining their beliefs, preserving their traditions and following their erring and corrupt ways. Then, suddenly, they offer the opportunity for reconciliation and hold out the prospect of compromise. In such circumstances, such an offer is hard to resist.

Here comes the second point, stating a clear directive: "*Await, then, your Lord's judgement in all patience, and pay no heed to any of these sinners and unbelievers.*" (Verse 24) All matters are subject to God's will. He may allow evil and falsehood to have their day, and He may allow the believers' trial to last long. All this will be for a purpose that sees His will being done: "*Await, then, your Lord's judgement in all patience,*" until it comes at its appointed time. The instruction given to the Prophet requires him to persevere despite all the harm to which he may be exposed, and all the trials he may be put through. He is to remain patient even when he sees falsehood achieving victory, and evil taking airs. Moreover, he is to persevere in holding to the truth the Qur'ān lays down. He is not to listen to any offer of compromise or a meeting halfway if this is at the expense of the message he is advocating: "*Pay no heed to any of these sinners and unbelievers.*" They do not offer anything good or beneficial.

How can they, when they are sinners and unbelievers? All that they offer you, when they try to compromise, is a share of sin and disbelief. They offer what they think will please and tempt you. They offered him what was indeed tempting: power, wealth and women. They were willing to make him their leader and to make him the richest among them. They also offered him pretty women. 'Utbah ibn Rabī'ah said to him: "Abandon this matter you are advocating and I will give you my daughter as your wife. I have the prettiest daughters among the Quraysh." Those advocating falsehood always make such tempting offers to advocates of the truth, seeking to silence their message.

"*Await, then, your Lord's judgement in all patience, and pay no heed to any of these sinners and unbelievers.*" (Verse 24) There is no meeting point between you and them. No bridge can be built over the wide gulf separating your method from theirs, your truth from their falsehood, your light from their darkness, your faith from their disbelief, your message of truth from their *jāhiliyyah.*

The Prophet is told to remain patient, even though the adversity may be continuous, the trial hard, and the temptation powerful. Yet patience does not come easy. Help and support are always needed. Hence: "*Remember your Lord's name morning and evening. At night prostrate yourself before Him, and extol His limitless glory throughout the long night.*" (Verses 25–26) This, in a nutshell, is all the help and support that is needed: remembering God's name at the beginning and end of the day, prostrating before Him at night, and glorifying Him at length. The Prophet is told that these are the means to maintain the bond with God who gave him the Qur'ān and who entrusted him with His message. He is the source of all power. The way ahead is long, the burden he carries is heavy, and he needs much support. Now, the support is identified as maintaining contact with God by glorifying Him through the long night. Thus, the servant meets his Master alone, speaking to Him directly, looking up to Him for favour and support, feeling His compassion that removes all trouble and relieves exhaustion. His power will transform His servants' weaknesses and lack of numbers. When they shed their earthly burdens and look at the great task entrusted to them, they will think little of all the hardships they are going through and their resolve to get on with the task ahead will be that much strengthened.

God is ever merciful. He entrusted His servant, the Prophet, with His message and revealed the Qur'ān to him. He is aware of the hardship he would meet along his way. Therefore, He did not leave him without support. On the contrary, He gave him the support and help He knew to be most useful and effective along his difficult journey. This remains the support needed by all advocates of the divine message, regardless of time, circumstance or place. It is the same message, with the same circumstances, facing the same intransigent opposition by falsehood, and for the same reasons. Falsehood employs the same tools and means against it. Let, then, the means the truth employs be the ones God knows to be the most effective.

The truth advocates of the divine message should always bear in mind is the one God impressed on the first advocate of this message, the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him). The duty to advocate the message is assigned by God, and it remains His message. The truth it outlines can never be mixed with the falsehood advocated by sinners and unbelievers. Hence, there can be no meeting point or reconciliation between the truth and falsehood. Nor can there be any halfway meeting between those advocating the truth and those advocating falsehood. They follow two ways that never meet. Should falsehood at times be very powerful and able to subdue the believers, who may be weak and small in number, it will be so because God, in His infinite wisdom, allows this. In such a situation, the only way is to remain patient and await God's judgement. In the meantime, support should be sought through night worship and glorification of Him. This is the only help that is guaranteed to work. This is an essential truth that must be fully understood by those who want to follow the Prophet's footsteps and tread along his way.

Divergent Ways

The *sūrah* continues to emphasize the fact that the Prophet's way has no meeting point with that of the unbelievers. They are so oblivious to what serves their own good, completely preoccupied with trivialities: "*These people love the fleeting life, and leave behind them a day that will be heavy.*" (Verse 27) Their concerns are petty, their goals insignificant, they are fully immersed in the fleeting life of this world, caring little

for the heavy day ahead. It is heavy with accountability and outcome. Such people cannot be heeded, and their way cannot be followed. They share no goal with the believers. Hence, no thought should be paid to their life, wealth, power and comfort. They all belong to this fleeting life and are, therefore, of little value. Their preference for this fleeting life indicates their inability to see what is good for them. This verse, then, continues with strengthening the Prophet and his followers as they faced the unbelievers' opposition. It also implies a warning for the unbelievers of the difficulty that lies ahead for them on the Day of Judgement.

The *sūrah* makes it clear that God, who created them and gave them all the power they enjoy, can easily replace them by others. However, in His infinite wisdom, He gives them time to reconsider:

> *It is We who have created them and strengthened their constitution. If it be Our will, We can replace them entirely with others of their kind.* (Verse 28)

This is a reminder to those unbelievers, who are proud of their strength, of the source of their power, and indeed the source of their very lives. It reassures the believers, few and weak as they were, that they actually advocate the message of the One who grants power to whom He will. It assures them that God's will operates according to His wisdom and to fulfil His purpose, until He makes His judgement. He is certainly the best of judges.

"*If it be Our will, We can replace them entirely with others of their kind.*" (Verse 28) They cannot use their power to defy God; it is He who has created them and given them their power. He is able to replace them with other people. If he gives them respite, this is an aspect of His grace that He bestows on His creatures. It is all His judgement and a manifestation of His wisdom.

Again, this verse aims to give the Prophet and the believers further strength, stating the respective positions of believers and unbelievers. It alerts the unbelievers who are so preoccupied with their love of this world and its pleasures, and who think too highly of their strength, that they must express their gratitude for God's favours and treat these as a test.

The *sūrah* alerts them further to the chance they still have as the Qur'ān, including the present *sūrah*, is recited to them: "*This is but a reminder. Let him who will, take the way to his Lord.*" (Verse 29)

This is followed by re-emphasizing God's absolute will, to which everything refers. This is mentioned here so as to ensure that people submit to its judgement, and that they recognize it as the ultimate power: "*Yet you cannot will except by the will of God. God is indeed All-Knowing, Wise.*" (Verse 30)

People should know that God Almighty is the One who decides and acts, and that He conducts the universe and holds sway over all things. They will then learn how to turn to Him and submit to His will. This is how such texts should be understood, recognizing at the same time that God has willed to give human beings the ability to distinguish truth from falsehood and to choose their way to either one or the other. They, thus, make their choice in accordance with God's will who knows the nature of human hearts and who has helped His servants by giving them knowledge, showing them the right way, sending messengers and revelation of the Qur'ān. Yet all this ends up determined by God's will. It is He who will guide a person to the right path through obedience and glorification of Him. When a person does not recognize God's controlling power and does not appeal to Him for help, then he has no guidance to what is good and will not glorify God.

Hence, "*He admits to His grace whoever He will, but for the wrongdoers He has prepared grievous suffering.*" (Verse 31) As we have repeatedly said, His will is free and absolute, taking whatever action He wishes. It is part of His will that His grace is granted to whoever He chooses. These are the ones who turn to Him, seeking His help and following His guidance. As for the wrongdoers, He gave them respite and granted them time, but they chose wrongly, so as to end in grievous suffering.

There is perfect harmony between the end and the beginning of the *sūrah*. The end gives an outline of the completion of the test to which man, whom God created from a drop of mingled fluid, is subjected. This after giving him guidance and allowing him to choose the way he wants to follow.

SŪRAH 77

Al-Mursalāt

(Sent Forth)

Prologue

This *sūrah* bears sharp features, powerful images and strong notes. Indeed, it sounds like a spitting fire. It puts hearts to trial, presenting questions and threats that pierce like sharp arrows. We see a host of images from both this life and the life to come, the universe and the human soul, as well as scenes of the suffering that unbelievers will endure. After each main scene, the *sūrah* levels a fire-like strike at those hearts who deny the truth, saying: "*Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.*" This comment is repeated ten times in this *sūrah* alone, as it is the final note deployed in each of its sections. It is an especially apt comment, given its sharp features and strong beat. In this respect, it reminds us of *Sūrah* 55, The Lord of Grace, where the same verse is repeated after the mention of every aspect of blessing: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" Likewise, in *Sūrah* 54, The Moon, the same comment is used after every image of punishment is drawn: "*How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings.*" The verse repeated in this *sūrah*, as in other *sūrahs*, serves to give its distinctively sharp tone.

The *sūrah* is composed of sections with short, quick verses. It changes its rhyme with each section, although some rhyming sounds are picked up again after they have been changed. All these sections, rhymes and

short verses are sharply felt, one after the other. One hardly recovers after one sharp note when a new one begins. Right from the outset, the general atmosphere is tempestuous, starting with a scene of strong winds, or angels: "*By those sent forth in swift succession; and those tempestuously storming on; and those scattering far and wide; and those separating [right and wrong] with all clarity; and those giving a reminder, with an excuse and a warning.*" (Verses 1–6) This opening is perfectly consistent with the ambience of the *sūrah*.

The Qur'ān is extraordinary in the way in which it uses particular frameworks to enhance the atmosphere of certain *sūrahs*. In *Sūrah* 93, The Morning Hours, which speaks about God's care and kindness, the framework is drawn from the bright morning hours and still nights. In *Sūrah* 100, The Coursers, which depicts the scattering of grave contents and the gathering of what is in people's breasts, we have a framework drawn from snorting horses striking sparks of fire. Further examples could be given in plenty.

Each of the ten sections that follow the opening of the *sūrah* represents a special round or a journey into a different world. This gives the *sūrah* great scope for reflection, feeling, ideas and responses. This scope is also much wider than the words and sentences imply.

The first round paints scenes from the day of distinction, showing the great upheaval that will take place in the universe. This is the appointment defined by God's messengers to mankind: "*When the stars are dimmed, and the sky is rent asunder, and the mountains are scattered like dust, and the messengers are given their appointed time... For what day has all this been set? For the day of distinction. Would that you knew what the day of distinction is! Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.*" (Verses 8–15)

The second round refers to the fates suffered by communities of olden times, highlighting the divine law that applies to those who deny the divine message: "*Did We not destroy those people of old? We shall certainly cause later ones to follow them. Thus do We deal with the guilty. Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.*" (Verses 16–19)

Round three takes us to the origins of man and the impression they give of God's overall planning: "*Have We not created you from a humble fluid, placing it in a safe lodging for a pre-determined term? Thus have We*

determined; excellent indeed is how We determine. Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth." (Verses 20–24)

In the fourth round we see how the earth, which takes its children, living or dead, to its bosom, has been equipped with the facility of stable life and with water that is necessary for life: "*Have We not made the earth an abode for the living and the dead? We have placed on it firm, lofty mountains and provided you with fresh water to drink. Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.*" (Verses 25–28)

The fifth round speaks of those who reject the divine message and how they are received with strong rebuke, as well as their impending punishment, on the day of distinction: "*Go to that which you used to deny! Go to a shadow rising in three columns; giving no shade, nor relief from the flame. It throws up sparks as huge as forts, as bright as yellow camels. Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.*" (Verses 29–34)

The next two rounds continue with the unbelievers, adding further rebuke: "*On that day they will not utter a word, and they will not be allowed to offer any excuse. Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth. This is the day of distinction: We have gathered you with all those people of old. If you have a scheme left, then use it against Me now. Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.*" (Verses 35–40)

Round eight speaks of the God-fearing and the blessings prepared for them: "*The God-fearing shall dwell amid cool shades and springs, and fruits as they may desire. Eat and drink to your hearts' content in return for what you did. Thus do We reward those who do good. Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.*" (Verses 41–45)

The last two rounds provide quick glimpses of the people who are bent on denying God's message. The first reproaches them and the second shows them in obstinate rejection: "*Eat and enjoy your life for a little while, for you are certainly guilty. Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth. When they are told to bow down before God, they do not bow down. Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.*" (Verses 46–49)

These rounds, their images and sharp notes conclude with a single verse asking: "*In what message, after this, will they believe?*" (Verse 50)

The listener follows the quick rhythm of the *sūrah* feeling almost out of breath at its succession of images. The subject matter of the *sūrah* is covered in several other *sūrahs*, particularly Makkan ones. However, the

Qur'ān tackles the truth it presents from different angles, in different lights, and with different emphases according to the situations they face. Such approaches address hearts and souls as best suits them, according to their conditions known to the One who has revealed the Qur'ān to His Messenger. They thus appear new with every new situation, because they produce new responses.

We see that this *sūrah* draws new images of hell, and takes a new approach in showing these images to unbelievers; in other words, it employs a new style of address. Thus, the *sūrah* acquires a distinctive character with intense features, sharp images and a rapid rhythm.

Al-Mursalāt (Sent Forth)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

By those sent forth in swift succession; (1)

وَٱلْمُرْسَلَٰتِ عُرْفًا ١

and those tempestuously storming on; (2)

فَٱلْعَٰصِفَٰتِ عَصْفًا ٢

and those scattering far and wide; (3)

وَٱلنَّٰشِرَٰتِ نَشْرًا ٣

and those separating [right and wrong] with all clarity; (4)

فَٱلْفَٰرِقَٰتِ فَرْقًا ٤

and those giving a reminder, (5)

فَٱلْمُلْقِيَٰتِ ذِكْرًا ٥

with an excuse and a warning, (6)

عُذْرًا أَوْ نُذْرًا ٦

what you have been promised shall be fulfilled. (7)

إِنَّمَا تُوعَدُونَ لَوَٰقِعٌ ٧

When the stars are dimmed, (8)

فَإِذَا ٱلنُّجُومُ طُمِسَتْ ٨

and the sky is rent asunder, (9)

وَإِذَا ٱلسَّمَآءُ فُرِجَتْ ٩

and the mountains are scattered like dust, (10)

وَإِذَا ٱلْجِبَالُ نُسِفَتْ ﴿١٠﴾

and the messengers are given their appointed time... (11)

وَإِذَا ٱلرُّسُلُ أُقِّتَتْ ﴿١١﴾

For what day has all this been set? (12)

لِأَيِّ يَوْمٍ أُجِّلَتْ ﴿١٢﴾

For the day of distinction. (13)

لِيَوْمِ ٱلْفَصْلِ ﴿١٣﴾

Would that you knew what the day of distinction is! (14)

وَمَآ أَدْرَىٰكَ مَا يَوْمُ ٱلْفَصْلِ ﴿١٤﴾

Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth. (15)

وَيْلٌ يَوْمَئِذٍ لِّلْمُكَذِّبِينَ ﴿١٥﴾

Did We not destroy those people of old? (16)

أَلَمْ نُهْلِكِ ٱلْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿١٦﴾

We shall certainly cause later ones to follow them. (17)

ثُمَّ نُتْبِعُهُمُ ٱلْءَاخِرِينَ ﴿١٧﴾

Thus do We deal with the guilty. (18)

كَذَٰلِكَ نَفْعَلُ بِٱلْمُجْرِمِينَ ﴿١٨﴾

Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth. (19)

وَيْلٌ يَوْمَئِذٍ لِّلْمُكَذِّبِينَ ﴿١٩﴾

Have We not created you from a humble fluid, (20)

أَلَمْ نَخْلُقكُّم مِّن مَّآءٍ مَّهِينٍ ﴿٢٠﴾

فَجَعَلْنَٰهُ فِى قَرَارٍ مَّكِينٍ ﴿٢١﴾

placing it in a safe lodging (21)

إِلَىٰ قَدَرٍ مَّعْلُومٍ ﴿٢٢﴾

for a pre-determined term? (22)

فَقَدَرْنَا فَنِعْمَ ٱلْقَٰدِرُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

Thus have We determined; excellent indeed is how We determine. (23)

وَيْلٌ يَوْمَئِذٍ لِّلْمُكَذِّبِينَ ﴿٢٤﴾

Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth. (24)

أَلَمْ نَجْعَلِ ٱلْأَرْضَ كِفَاتًا ﴿٢٥﴾

Have We not made the earth an abode (25)

أَحْيَآءً وَأَمْوَٰتًا ﴿٢٦﴾

for the living and the dead? (26)

وَجَعَلْنَا فِيهَا رَوَٰسِىَ شَٰمِخَٰتٍ
وَأَسْقَيْنَٰكُم مَّآءً فُرَاتًا ﴿٢٧﴾

We have placed on it firm, lofty mountains and provided you with fresh water to drink. (27)

وَيْلٌ يَوْمَئِذٍ لِّلْمُكَذِّبِينَ ﴿٢٨﴾

Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth. (28)

ٱنطَلِقُوٓا۟ إِلَىٰ مَا كُنتُم بِهِۦ تُكَذِّبُونَ ﴿٢٩﴾

Go to that which you used to deny! (29)

ٱنطَلِقُوٓا۟ إِلَىٰ ظِلٍّ ذِى ثَلَٰثِ شُعَبٍ ﴿٣٠﴾

Go to a shadow rising in three columns; (30)

لَّا ظَلِيلٍ وَلَا يُغْنِى مِنَ ٱللَّهَبِ ﴿٣١﴾

giving no shade, nor relief from the flame. (31)

It throws up sparks as huge as forts, (32)

إِنَّهَا تَرۡمِي بِشَرَرٖ كَٱلۡقَصۡرِ ٣٢

as bright as yellow camels. (33)

كَأَنَّهُۥ جِمَٰلَتٞ صُفۡرٞ ٣٣

Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth. (34)

وَيۡلٞ يَوۡمَئِذٖ لِّلۡمُكَذِّبِينَ ٣٤

On that day they will not utter a word, (35)

هَٰذَا يَوۡمُ لَا يَنطِقُونَ ٣٥

and they will not be allowed to offer any excuse. (36)

وَلَا يُؤۡذَنُ لَهُمۡ فَيَعۡتَذِرُونَ ٣٦

Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth. (37)

وَيۡلٞ يَوۡمَئِذٖ لِّلۡمُكَذِّبِينَ ٣٧

This is the day of distinction: We have gathered you with all those people of old. (38)

هَٰذَا يَوۡمُ ٱلۡفَصۡلِۖ جَمَعۡنَٰكُمۡ وَٱلۡأَوَّلِينَ ٣٨

If you have a scheme left, then use it against Me now. (39)

فَإِن كَانَ لَكُمۡ كَيۡدٞ فَكِيدُونِ ٣٩

Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth. (40)

وَيۡلٞ يَوۡمَئِذٖ لِّلۡمُكَذِّبِينَ ٤٠

The God-fearing shall dwell amid cool shades and springs, (41)

إِنَّ ٱلۡمُتَّقِينَ فِي ظِلَٰلٖ وَعُيُونٖ ٤١

and fruits as they may desire. (42)

وَفَوَٰكِهَ مِمَّا يَشۡتَهُونَ ٤٢

Eat and drink to your hearts' content in return for what you did. (43)

كُلُوا وَاشْرَبُوا هَنِيٓـًٔا بِمَا كُنتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٤٣﴾

Thus do We reward those who do good. (44)

إِنَّا كَذَٰلِكَ نَجْزِى ٱلْمُحْسِنِينَ ﴿٤٤﴾

Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth. (45)

وَيْلٌ يَوْمَئِذٍ لِّلْمُكَذِّبِينَ ﴿٤٥﴾

Eat and enjoy your life for a little while, for you are certainly guilty. (46)

كُلُوا وَتَمَتَّعُوا قَلِيلًا إِنَّكُم مُّجْرِمُونَ ﴿٤٦﴾

Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth. (47)

وَيْلٌ يَوْمَئِذٍ لِّلْمُكَذِّبِينَ ﴿٤٧﴾

When they are told to bow down before God, they do not bow down. (48)

وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمُ ٱرْكَعُوا لَا يَرْكَعُونَ ﴿٤٨﴾

Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth. (49)

وَيْلٌ يَوْمَئِذٍ لِّلْمُكَذِّبِينَ ﴿٤٩﴾

In what message, after this, will they believe? (50)

فَبِأَىِّ حَدِيثٍۭ بَعْدَهُۥ يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿٥٠﴾

Enigmatic Beginning

By those sent forth in swift succession; and those tempestuously storming on; and those scattering far and wide; and those separating [right and wrong] with all clarity; and those giving a reminder, with an excuse and a warning, what you have been promised shall be fulfilled. (Verses 1–7)

The question here is that of the resurrection which the unbelievers found very hard to accept, yet the Qur'ān confirms it time after time, in many *sūrahs*, and in various ways. It was especially necessary that the Qur'ān take such care in establishing the truth of resurrection, this so that the faith can be properly established in people's minds and hearts and further that their standards and values could then be redefined. Belief in the Day of Judgement is the corner-stone of both the divine faith and human life. It is the pivot around which everything in life turns, and the criterion that judges all values and standards. Hence, establishing the truth of resurrection and subsequent reckoning and judgement needed such a sustained effort.

The *sūrah* begins with an oath by God that this promise of a life to come is certainly true. The way the oath is phrased suggests that that by which God swears belongs to the realm beyond our perception. It mentions some hidden forces that have a definite effect on the universe and on human life. Early scholars differed as to what these were: some said that they all refer to winds, and some said they refer to angels, while a third group said that some refer to winds and some to angels. It is clear, then, that these terms are ambiguous, which makes them best suited for an oath by God confirming an event which only He knows about. Just as these ambiguous things exist and have an effect on human life, this event belonging to the world beyond our perception will certainly take place.

"*By those sent forth in swift succession.*" (Verse 1) Abū Hurayrah says that this is a reference to the angels. The same is reported to have been said by Masrūq, Abū al-Ḍuḥā, Mujāhid (in one report), al-Suddī, al-Rabī' ibn Anas and Abū Ṣāliḥ. Thus the verse means an oath by the angels that are sent forth in successive waves, like running horses. Abū Ṣāliḥ says that the next four verses also refer to the angels.

Ibn Mas'ūd is reported to have said that '*those sent forth*' refers to the wind, which means that winds are sent in succession like horses running. He is reported to have said that those '*storming on*' and '*scattering far and wide*' [mentioned in the next two verses] also refer to the wind. This view is shared by Ibn 'Abbās, Mujāhid (in a second report), Qatādah and in another report by Abū Ṣāliḥ.

Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī is uncertain whether '*those sent forth*' mentioned in the first verse refers to the angels or to the wind, but he is certain that the stormers and scatterers are the winds. He explains that the winds scatter the clouds in the sky.

Ibn Mas'ūd says that "*those separating [right and wrong] with all clarity; and those giving a reminder, with an excuse and a warning,*" refer to the angels. This is also stated by Ibn 'Abbās, Masrūq, Mujāhid, Qatādah, al-Rabī' ibn Anas, al-Suddī and al-Thawrī. It is the angels that come down carrying God's orders to His messengers, separating right from wrong, and giving revelations to those messengers that contain justification and a warning to mankind.

We note that the ambiguity is intended to give these matters by which the oath is made a particularly awesome air. This is the same as in *Sūrahs* 51 and 79. The first of these begins with the oath: "*By the winds that scatter far and wide.*" *Sūrah* 79 also starts with an ambiguous oath: "*By those that pluck out vehemently.*" This ambiguity, evident in the differences of opinion about their meaning, is intended, because their very ambiguity combines with the quick rhythm employed in the opening of the *sūrah* to produce a jolt or a shake in the listener or reader. This fits perfectly with the subject matter of the *sūrah*. In fact, every subsequent section delivers such a jolt. Thus the *sūrah* may be compared to someone in authority taking a person by the collar as he questions him about a misdeed or about his negation of something very obvious, then releasing him with a strong warning: "*Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.*"

Universal Upheaval

This enigmatic beginning is now followed by a strong jolt as we are shown images of great events that take place in the universe on the day appointed for God's messengers to present the results of their having delivered the divine message to all generations of mankind:

> *When the stars are dimmed, and the sky is rent asunder, and the mountains are scattered like dust, and the messengers are given their*

> *appointed time... For what day has all this been set? For the day of distinction. Would that you knew what the day of distinction is! Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.* (Verses 8–15)

On that day, the stars lose their light, and the sky is split apart, while the mountains crash and scatter like dust. Similar images of this universal upheaval are given in several *sūrahs*, all suggesting that the system of the universe we see will collapse and its collapse will be accompanied by great crashes and explosions unlike any of the smaller events – volcanoes erupting, thunderbolts, earthquakes and the like – that nonetheless leave people absolutely terrified. To compare what will happen on that day to volcanoes and earthquakes is the same as comparing bonfires organized on festive occasions to nuclear explosions. This is merely to give an idea of what will happen. In fact, it is impossible to describe the great horror that will take place when the universe explodes and scatters. That horror is beyond all human imagination.

Alongside this horror, the *sūrah* mentions another important event that is delayed until that day. It is the time appointed for God's messengers to present the outcome of their efforts in advocating the divine message throughout all generations of human life. Presenting this final account is greater than what happens to the skies, the earth and the mountains. It will entail a judgement by God of all matters relating to life on earth. This is the final word concerning all human generations across the centuries. Its description is given an air of awe that suggests that its true nature is beyond human comprehension: "*For what day has all this been set? For the day of distinction. Would that you knew what the day of distinction is!*" (Verses 12–14) It is clear that these verses are speaking about something great and serious. When this sense of seriousness, which is greater than the stars losing their light and the rending of the skies and the crashing of the mountains, is clearly felt, a frightening warning is given: "*Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.*" (Verse 15)

This warning by the Almighty, against the backdrop of the great universal upheaval and the majestic scene when God's messengers submit their final account on the day of distinction, is very serious indeed.

Three Quick Rounds

The first round taking us to the expected universal upheaval on the Day of Judgement is followed by one going back to the fates suffered by earlier communities that rejected the divine faith. Later communities could follow on their heels:

> *Did We not destroy those people of old? We shall certainly cause later ones to follow them. Thus do We deal with the guilty. Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.* (Verses 16–18)

One strike to reveal the fates of past communities, numerous as they were and another to reveal what could happen to later ones, numerous as they may be. The scene of destruction stretches as far as anyone can see. Now the warning comes clear, stating the law God set in operation: "*Thus do We deal with the guilty.*" (Verse 18) It is His law that never fails. As those who are guilty expect a fate like earlier communities, the warning of impending doom is repeated: "*Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.*" (Verse 19)

The next round turns to the living and how they are brought into life, in accordance with elaborate planning:

> *Have We not created you from a humble fluid, placing it in a safe lodging for a pre-determined term? Thus have We determined; excellent indeed is how We determine. Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.* (Verses 20–24)

The long and remarkable journey of an embryo, from the moment of conception, is included here, in a few fine touches, starting with a humble fluid being placed after conception in the uterus that gives it a safe lodging until an appointed time. The whole journey is planned with remarkable accuracy at every stage. A comment is added here to emphasize the infinite wisdom that assigns a fine, accurate measure to everything: "*Thus have We determined; excellent indeed is how We determine.*" (Verse 23) With this planned determination that applies

universally, the warning is repeated again: "*Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.*" (Verse 24)

We then have a round on earth and the life God has determined on it for mankind, giving it the facilities that make such human life easy:

> *Have We not made the earth an abode for the living and the dead? We have placed on it firm, lofty mountains and provided you with fresh water to drink. Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.* (Verses 25–28)

These verses alert us to what we see on earth, which is made an abode embracing its children in life and death. Lofty mountains are placed on it, making it firm, and over their tops the clouds gather and then clear water runs down via them to the ground. Could all this have come about by anything other than elaborate and wise planning? How can those unbelievers continue to deny the truth they see with their own eyes: "*Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.*" (Verse 28)

The Release

Having filled our senses with such effects as these images and rounds produce, the *sūrah* suddenly moves to the Day of Judgement when accounts are checked and requital determined. The dreaded command is given to the guilty to go on their way to suffer the punishment they were wont to deny. The command is coupled with a strong and painful rebuke:

> *Go to that which you used to deny! Go to a shadow rising in three columns; giving no shade, nor relief from the flame. It throws up sparks as huge as forts, as bright as yellow camels. Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.* (Verses 29–34)

Now that you have been long restrained on this day of distinction, you may go. But where can they go? To remain constrained is much better than this release, because they are told: "*Go to that which you used*

to deny." (Verse 29) It is present here before their very eyes. "*Go to a shadow rising in three columns.*" (Verse 30) The smoke of hell rises in three columns giving a shadow to which they are told to go. Yet the scorch of the flame is better than this shadow, because it is "*giving no shade, nor relief from the flame.*" (Verse 31) It is suffocating and burning. To call it a shadow or shade, the Arabic word *ẓill* carrying both meanings, is merely sarcastic.

They are told to go, and they know where they will have to go. Therefore, their destination is not mentioned by name: "*It throws up sparks as huge as forts, as bright as yellow camels.*" (Verses 32–33) Sparks are thrown in quick succession, but they are as big as large stone buildings, looking like yellow camels grazing. Such are the sparks thrown up by this fire. What is that fire like? At the moment we are absorbed in thought about this, the stern warning is repeated: "*Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.*" (Verse 34)

The *sūrah* has described the physical horror, giving us an image of hell. Now it presents the psychological horror that leaves the guilty speechless:

> *On that day they will not utter a word, and they will not be allowed to offer any excuse. Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.* (Verses 35–37)

The horror described here is that deafening silence, when everyone is utterly speechless. All look humble, without a word of excuse. The time for arguments and excuses is over. Woe is present now: "*Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.*" (Verse 37) Elsewhere in the Qur'ān we have scenes describing their sorrow and grief, as well as the excuses they present and the oaths they swear. That day is very long, and both situations happen then, as Ibn 'Abbās explains. Here, the image given is that of absolute silence as it fits better with the general ambience of the *sūrah*.

> *This is the day of distinction: We have gathered you with all those people of old. If you have a scheme left, then use it against Me now. Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.* (Verses 38–40)

This is, then, the day of distinction, not one for submitting excuses and justifications. You are gathered here together with all communities that lived before you so that if you can work out a plan or you are able to contrive something, you can go ahead and do it. None, however, can devise or contrive anything. The painful rebuke is met with deep silence. "*Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.*" (Verse 40)

The Other Group

Now the *sūrah* gives us an image of the God-fearing and how they are honoured on that day:

> *The God-fearing shall dwell amid cool shades and springs, and fruits as they may desire. Eat and drink to your hearts' content in return for what you did. Thus do We reward those who do good. Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.* (Verses 41–45)

These shades the God-fearing enjoy are real ones, unlike the shadow of three columns that gives no protection from the fire. They dwell among springs of water, not in the midst of choking smoke. They have "*fruits as they may desire.*" (Verse 42) What is more is that such material luxuries are given to them in front of all people gathered on that day. They all listen as the God-fearing are honoured: "*Eat and drink to your hearts' content in return for what you did. Thus do We reward those who do good.*" (Verses 43–44) How welcome is such friendly honour bestowed upon them by the Almighty. In contrast, the warning is repeated to the other group: "*Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.*" (Verse 45)

The *sūrah* has so far shown nothing of this present life. Now it gives a very quick glimpse of it. We are now back on earth, where strong reproach is levelled at those who are guilty:

> *Eat and enjoy your life for a little while, for you are certainly guilty. Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.* (Verses 46–47)

Thus the two lives, the present one and the other to come, are shown in quick succession, in two images that appear to be before us now, even

though the gap between them stretches into the future, age upon age. The address was given first to the God-fearing in the life to come. It is then directed to the guilty here in this life. It is as if they are being told to consider the difference between the two moments. You may eat and enjoy yourselves a little here in this world, but you will then be deprived of it all in the next, where you will receive your due punishment: "*Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.*" (Verse 47)

The *sūrah* wonders at their attitude as they are presented with divine guidance and called upon to follow it. Yet still they persistently refuse:

> *When they are told to bow down before God, they do not bow down. Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.* (Verses 48–49)

Yet they are given every opportunity to see the guidance and consider the warning. Still, they continue with their erring ways. Hence, the question: "*In what message, after this, will they believe?*" (Verse 50) A person who listens to this discourse, which shakes firm mountains, who still does not believe will never come to believe, no matter how he is addressed. He is only fit for utter misery and a fate only the most miserable will suffer.

Thus the *sūrah* concludes. Its construction, musical beat, powerful images, sharp comments combine to make of it an attack that no heart can resist. Infinite in His glory is God who revealed this Qur'ān and gave it this powerful effect.